A Foolish Wit

by seabiscuit

Summary

Lena Luthor needs a husband, Clark Danvers needs an easy resolution to his cash flow problem.

Unfortunately, the best laid plans often go awry.

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Or, Lena Luthor is actually rich, but Clark Danvers isn't actually Clark Danvers. It's complicated.

Notes

This fic wouldn't have happened w/o Narraboth and their whack ass ideas/specifically this whack ass post found here. Thank you for your blessing to write this but also I hate you for it.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Clark

“I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow, than a man swear he loves me.”

William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*

The only thing Lena Luthor can think about on the day of Lex’s funeral is Clark Danvers. This is odd for a few reasons. Firstly, her only brother is dead—murdered, in fact. The hows and whys aren’t terribly important; a rival trading company, two hoodlums apprehended into police custody, one dead brother. Lex had been her friend once and she thought he might be again, although if those feelings of optimism were ever to bear fruit Lena isn’t sure and will probably never know.

Secondly, while she has, of course, thought about Clark Danvers before—he is the best blacksmith for horseshoes in a 20 mile radius and also extremely handsome (she knows this because the maids titter over him and who’s turn it is to retrieve that month’s order from the smith’s, of course, not by her own estimation)—endless thoughts do feel a little excessive.

Nonetheless, Clark’s face pops into her mind as soon as she wakes up in the morning and stays there, like something foul stuck to the bottom of her boot. Her first thought is to ask after him, that perhaps something nasty had befallen him during the night. Lillian had once called her clairvoyant in a spat of meanness. She’d taken it to heart, like she did with many of her mother’s insults. Her favorite books at the time were, after all, stories of ghosts and black cats and bad omens, reflective of the bad luck she herself experienced from the moment of her dreadful birth.

Still, Lena scuttles the thought. Asking after Mr. Danvers to the maids will just induce another wave of fevered whisperings which she is not in the mood to tolerate. She has a funeral to prepare for, after all.

As they step out of the church awash in the crowd of people, rubberneckers more than friends, Lena dons her black leather gloves and turns to her maid. “Ms. Huang.” She says, “Will you run ahead and tell the driver to take me back to the house? I’m feeling a little tired.”

Ms. Huang wisely says nothing more than “Yes, Ma’am.” And trots down to notify the carriage. Tomorrow will be a whirlwind, Lena knows. She’ll have only today as a grace period before the vultures begin to circle. There is a clock that has been ticking down from the moment she was informed of Lex’s death, and the hour hand is rapidly approaching midnight. Until that moment she has business to attend to, and a house that will surely be quieter now that it is one person lighter.

And it is—detestable as she’d found Lex near the end of his life, the overwhelming gap left in the home they shared is somehow worse. It is this small hole in her constitution that Clark Danvers must use to burrow in and stay rooted in her thoughts. She doesn’t stop thinking about him. Not as she removes her gloves and winter coat in the foyer, and not as she sits in her study writing to her lawyer. He’s a tawny specter in the back of her mind, an answer to a question that Lena hasn’t been asked yet. Clark Danvers, town blacksmith, boy who she’s known peripherally since his family moved to the area at the tender age of 16, when Lena was 14. He was handsome then, too.

The thought is banished as soon as it appears. She knows that he is handsome because other women find him handsome. He was as disgustingly optimistic then, as starry-eyed, a gnat buzzing in her ear.
That much she knows for herself. And yet he remains unmarried, although such a man should have his pick of the women living in the township.

She doesn’t realize that she’s written his name not once, but three times on the sheet of paper in front of her until it’s too late. Huffing, Lena crumples it up and chucks it into the waste basket beside her before ringing the bell placed beside her stack of paper. A servant enters the study presently.

“Mr. Weaver,” Lena begins. “Have you notified Mr. Person that I will be requiring his services tomorrow morning?”

Mr. Weaver stumbles. “I thought you said you wouldn’t be needing him until next week, Miss.”

“Well.” Lena has fire trapped in her chest with nowhere else to go but Mr. Weaver. Her grip clenches around her pen. “In light of my brother’s recent and untimely death I think it prudent to expedite the date of our meeting. Do you not agree?”

The man in front of her shifts his weight from foot to foot, hands clasped in front of him. He seems to be straining to maintain eye contact. “Yes, Ms. Luthor. I agree.”

“I’m not sure why you didn’t anticipate this turn of events. Do I not pay you enough to put even the most minimal of efforts into your job, Mr. Weaver?”

“No, Mrs. Luthor, my salary is plenty.”

“Then why are you standing there like a slack jawed ape, sir? Run to Mr. Person and inform him presently that I will be in his office at half past 9 tomorrow morning. Go on, go!”

She sighs when he scuttles off, shutting the door behind him, and leans back into her chair. This is an eternal heachache that is just in it’s early stages. Lena rubs her temples and then bends back forward to hang her head into her hands on the desk.

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It’s unusual for there to be another soul in Samuel Person’s office before the tender hour of 11 in the morning. The man himself is getting into his old age and with it, developing a taste for sleep and for drink. Lena isn’t sure if he would even open his offices in the morning if it weren’t by her request. Therefore, it’s strange to hear the agitated voice of a man trickling through the closed door of his office when she arrives. Already peeved at being made to wait, Lena situates herself in the compact sitting room and tries to extend her ear to the spirited discussion beyond.

She doesn’t need to try for very long, however, because an agitated-looking Mr. Ernest Danby emerges from the room not seconds later. He’s red all the way to the tips of his ears, but it doesn’t mask the large bruise blooming along his jawline. Lena lifts her eyebrows and drops her jaw, unable to school herself

Realizing he’s not alone in the room, Mr. Danby collects himself enough to bow slightly in her direction. “Ms. Luthor. You must forgive me for being so rude, but I don’t have time for pleasantries at the moment.”

“Of course.” Lena replies, watching astonished as he all but flees the room, leaving the door to Mr. Person’s office hanging ajar. When she peers in, the lawyer has his head hung and shaking over a stack of papers. He stands at the sight of her, gesturing toward the chair on the other side of his desk. Once Lena is settled, he seats himself once more.

“Allow me to start by giving my condolences on your brother’s passing.”
“Thank you, Mr. Person. May I ask, is Mr. Danby quite alright?”

Mr. Person shakes his head again and glances at the ceiling as if appealing to the heavens. “Do you mind if I smoke, Ms. Luthor?”

“Go ahead.”

He fetches a leather pouch from his coat and begins fixing his pipe as he speaks, adding tobacco and tamping it down thrice over. Mr. Person has been the Luthor family lawyer for as long as Lena has been alive plus change, and to her recollection his fingernails have always been yellow. “He got in a spat with a client last night outside of Barbara’s. Nasty business.”

“What client?”

“One Mr. Clark Danvers it would seem.” Lena can’t keep the shock from her face. Mr. Person strikes a match on his desk, holds it to the bowl of his pipe, and takes a thoughtful puff. “From what Mr. Danby tells me, Mr. Danvers asked for a sizeable loan for the purposes of keeping his shop above water and when the time came to pay back the money, he demurred. It ended badly, and now Mr. Danby wants to seek legal recourse against Mr. Danvers.”

Lena takes that information and tucks it away in the back of her mind, makes a suitable performance of a feminine gasp and a how dreadful, and moves the conversation along. Mr. Person has already done his research on her situation befitting his position of her family’s preferred attorney. He talks in circles in legal jargon for some time, puffing on his pipe and shuffling through papers in lieu of looking her in the eye.

To his credit, when she asks him to cut to the chase, he does. “You must be married, and soon.” Mr. Person sets his pipe onto the oak surface of his desk, an added emphasis on the situation. “Otherwise your family’s company will be left…vulnerable.”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t expecting this.” Lena shifts in her chair and turns her gloves over in her lap. Her hands alternate between her gloves and fussing with the fabric of her dress. “How long do I have?”

“If you had a man waiting in the wings to marry you tonight, that would be best.” Mr. Person chuckles. Lena frowns. “Jesting aside, there are no male heirs left in the Luthor clan, which leaves you in a very precarious position. As soon as you can, Ms. Luthor.”

Lena Luthor, in her waking hours, tries her best to convince herself that she does not believe in spirits, or clairvoyants, or the cold hand of fate. But Clark Danvers had appeared to her that day as suddenly, clearly, and persistently as if she’d dreamed him from her own free will. This is a private thought, a homespun belief, of which Lena has many. You shouldn’t walk under ladders, don’t let a black cat cross your path, sometimes coincidences are more than what they seem on the surface.

“I may have somebody in mind.”

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“Clark Danvers?” Mr. Person says for the fifth time. He’s standing next to the window, pipe in hand, mouth set in a grim line. “The town blacksmith, Ms. Luthor, really? Is that really befitting a woman of your standing?”

“I think he’s a fine choice.” Lena siffs. She folds up her sleeve to look at her wristwatch. This meeting is becoming tedious.
“You do know that he’s an—“ Mr. Person lowers his voice. “Avowed bachelor, don’t you?”

“I’m perfectly aware.” Lena ducks to hide the smile pulling at her mouth. “All the better for me, I say. He seems...malleable.”

“And what makes you think he’s going to say yes?”

Lena’s smile only grows.

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Luckily for Lena, Clark could be picked out from a crowd of a hundred men from the sheer slightness of him alone, and she notes him almost immediately after exiting the carriage. Slender and well put together for a man of his age, he’s talking to one of the men minding a stall who she recognizes as somebody she’s done business with before—Winn Schott, maybe. Clark drinks of a tin cup filled with something warm, wipes the excess from his mouth with the back of his left hand, and extends it back to Mr. Schott. As he takes the cup back, Winn’s hand rests over Clark’s and lingers there for a moment, until Clark retracts.

Lena watches the interaction with interest from her vantage point down the street. She pretends to be browsing a stall, eyeing the two men askance all the while. Clark is all towheaded boyishness, hands stuffed in the pockets of his trousers and rocking back on his heels. Winn, on the other hand, seems—taken, perhaps. He’s leaning on his elbows, head cradled in the palm of his hand, dreamy smile fixed on his face.

Clark departs, Lena makes her move. Winn isn’t expecting her, which is exactly the way she wants it, and when he looks up his expression shifts all at once from surprise to confusion to deep, primal fear. He stutters out a greeting and nearly knocks all of his merchandise askew in the process.

“Ms. Luthor.” He says in a tremulous voice. “What can I help you with today?”

Lena isn’t looking at him, instead focusing on Clark’s retreating back. “That man you were talking to earlier. Remind me of his name?”

“M...Mr. Danvers?” Winn says with a frail chuckle, unsure if she’s telling an unfunny joke. “You’ve known each other since you were children.”

“And what business does he have with you?”

“Well Mr. Danvers and I, ah—“

“You two are friends?”

“Yes.”

“Close friends? Bosom buddies?”

There’s a pinkness to Mr. Schott’s face that cannot be explained entirely by the cold. He scratches at his stubbled cheek. “I suppose so, I mean I’d like to think so, we haven’t had that conversation in so many words but we spend a lot of time together and—“

“Mr. Schott.” Lena cuts him off with a hard look. “Spare me.”

“Right, sorry. Yes, we are close.”

“And so, in this infinite closeness, would you happen to know if Mr. Danvers has any...suitors?”
Mr. Schott balks. “Suitors, ma’am?”

“Yes, Mr. Schott. Young women vying for the pleasure of his hand.”

“Oh.” The man looks faintly constipated. “I would say most of the girls in town think Mr. Danvers to be quite a catch. But he is an avowed bachelor, if you know what I mean.”

She does. And she takes pity on him, eventually. He has the look of a dog who’s just pissed on the floor but doesn’t know exactly what they did wrong. Lena can hear him unclenching as she turns away. If Winn is right, Mr. Danvers may be as perfect a specimen for what she needs as if she’d created him herself. Unattached, an avowed bachelor--so sure not to make any untoward advances on her--in a moment of dire financial straits. It’s the exact kind of situation Lena can leverage perfectly, like conducting a symphony, note by tedious note.

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Barbara’s, by virtue of being the only place to obtain drink in the township, is nearly always busy in the evening. Lena Luthor knows this, like she knows most other things, by word of mouth. She has never been, and if not for the strange events of the last week, the thought of going would never have crossed her mind.

And yet, those strange events had come to pass, and so she found herself outside of the tavern on a cold November night. The street outside is frigid, but the glow of the tavern windows are honey warm. Lena does something very unlike herself and hesitates, gripping her shawl tight around her shoulders. She allows herself exactly one minute to consider if she’s making the right choice.

That done, she goes inside.

There’s a din and bodies moving haphazardly. The interior is all wood, tables scattered about, and the lanterns hung do very little to actually illuminate the place. Lena squints. So many of the patrons look the same, busty girls in tattered clothes and young, fawning men with their top shirt button undone. She orders a whiskey from the barkeeper and looks.

Lena sees Mr. Schott before anybody else. He’s sitting at a table with a man Lena realizes is Mr. Danvers and a woman she knows as his sister, Alexandra Danvers. She sees his nearly empty pint and the merry way he has his arm thrown over Clark’s shoulder, pulling him closer to his body as he laughs at something Alex has said.

Clark, however, is the first to spot her. Lena feels his gaze as soon as it becomes marked upon her body. The corner of his left eye is blackened with a bruise, a shiner as he would describe it to her later, the sclera of that eye marred with a circle of blood. Even from behind the round wire rims of his spectacles it’s glaring.

Then, something curious: Clark Danvers blushes. Out of the corner of her eye, she watches him lick his palm and use it to smooth back an errant blond curl from his forehead before saying something to Alex, rising, and moving towards the bar where Lena stands.

She’s expecting a little more than Hello when he approaches her, but that’s exactly what she gets and she takes it. In many ways, Clark still seems to be the clumsy 16 year old boy who’d tried to show her magic tricks while she was waiting for her mother to be done in the township shops. His earnestness is as detestable to her now as it was then.

“Hello, Mr. Danvers. That’s a fine bruise you’re sporting.”

Clark touches his roughed up eye with the tips of two fingers. It’s a keenly feminine gesture but
Clark is a keenly feminine man, after all. “It’s nothing. A rough night at the bar. Hey, can I get you something to drink?”

Lena takes a pointed sip of her whiskey and Clark stutters, nodding. “Right. Would you want to take a turn outside? It’s a nice night. Not too cold yet. You never come by the shop anymore and we could talk or—catch up, perhaps, I don’t know—“

“What I would like, Mr. Danvers,” Lena says, cutting him off. He blinks at her owlishly. “Is for you to call on me tomorrow afternoon. Do you think you could manage that?”

“Call on you?” Clark stutters.

“Yes, Mr. Danvers. I presume you know the meaning of the word.”

“Yes, I do. Of course I do.” He laughs, takes a swig of his drink. “Sure, I’ll call on you. Are you sure I can’t get you another drink? You could come and sit with my sister and Winn.” He gestures over to where Alex and Winn are watching them, both with steadfast frowns on their faces. Lena grimaces and finishes her whiskey in one harsh swallow, slamming the glass down on the counter.

“No, I think not. I don’t think spending additional time in this environment would be good for my health.” Having delivered her message, Lena gathers her shawl and prepares to depart and leave a stuttering Clark Danvers in her wake. “I’ll see you tomorrow Mr. Danvers.”

“Wait, hold on--Ms. Luthor!” Clark follows her to the front step of the tavern, adjusting his glasses. Lena turns to him expectantly. The audacity of it, to hold her up, and for what? He’s stuttering like an idiot. “What time?” “Excuse me?”

“What time,” He repeats. “Shall I call on you tomorrow, is there a time you’d prefer?”

“Midday will be fine, Mr. Danvers. Now, if you’ll excuse me…” She looks at her wristwatch pointedly and he takes the hint, bobbing his head and backing hesitantly into the warm, rowdy embrace of Barbara’s.

“I’m looking forward to it.” Is the last thing he says before he’s gone, prompting Lena to roll her eyes. The air outside has a nastier bite than it did when she first exited the carriage. Lena considers Clark’s blush, the way he stuttered, and finds there’s something odd about it. Clark Danvers, avowed bachelor, and yet seemingly quite taken over her. As she enters the carriage Lena supposes there’s no sense in dwelling on it—it’s all a means to an end, after all.

Clark calls at exactly 5 minutes until midday. Lena is overseeing the table settings in the smaller dining room when Ms. Huang enters, curtsies, and steps aside to reveal the young man behind her.

He’s looking much more put together than the previous night, his hair (God, Lena thinks, her mother is going to have her head for bringing a blonde into the family—a problem for another day) is properly combed back, his shirt and trousers pressed. In his hand are a bunch of flowers, looking ragtag, wrapped in a butcher’s sheet. He extends them and has the audacity to look proud.

“Ms. Huang, will you take those,” Lena pauses, waves her hand. “Somewhere else?”

“Yes, Ms. Luthor.” Ms. Huang smiles at Clark as she takes the flowers from his hand. He looks bewildered and a little crestfallen.
“Please have a seat, Mr. Danvers. The magistrate will be joining us shortly.”

This only exasperates the look of confusion on his face, but he sits gamely. “The magistrate, Ms. Luthor?”

“Yes. I wanted some time to talk to you before he arrived.” Behind them, servants busy themselves bringing food to the table. Tea biscuits, coffee, a cake. Clark watches the spread with wide eyes, sitting on his hands like an excited child. “Not used to so much food?”

“No.” Clark admits. “At home it’s mostly hardtack and sardines.”

Lena wrinkles her nose. “Dig in. I’m watching my figure.”

He does just that, piling his plate with sweets and pouring a generous cup of coffee. Clark fills hers before his own, a gentleman to the quick of him.

“I suppose you know by now about Mr. Luthor’s passing.”

Clark swallows, nodding. “Yes, and I was very sorry to hear it. Mr. Luthor was—“

“Let’s not get into what Mr. Luthor was or wasn’t. The point is, his death left me in a somewhat precarious situation. There are no more male heirs in the family, and I am unwed. And to my understanding, you’re in a situation yourself.”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“I bumped into Mr. Danby yesterday. He also had a nasty bruise.”

Clark stutters, then pushes his plate of sweets away, half finished. His face sours, lips pursed, and he runs the palm of his hand over his hair. “I’ll have the money to pay Mr. Danby by the end of the month. Business is picking up and—“

“No need.” Feeling suddenly peckish, Lena selects a biscuit for herself and sets it on her plate. “I’ve settled your debt with Mr. Danby and made certain he won’t be pursuing legal recourse.” She can feel Clark gawking at her. “I think we could be assets to one another, Mr. Danvers. You need a certain sense of financial comfort and I need—“

“You need a husband.” Clark finishes, sitting back in his chair. Realization dawns over his face plain as day. Lena wonders with genuine curiosity what must be running through his mind in the moment. She wishes she had a telescope with which she could just—peer in, take a look. Not that she’s ever been truly curious about the machinations of Clark Danvers’s mind, but there’s clearly some kind of journey happening based on the faces he’s making. “May I ask a question?”

“If you must.” Lena takes a delicate bite of her biscuit.

“Why me? It’s no secret that you don’t like me, despite my best efforts—“

“I don’t like any man, Mr. Danvers. You’re not special.” Clark’s lips quirk up at that. “It was a coincidence that I discovered you in the exact kind of situation I could help you out of. I don’t have time to find somebody more suitable. Nothing more.”

Clark hums and nods his head, glancing down to his hands which are folded in his lap. “I have one more question.” Lena rolls her eyes, but tilts her head in acquiescence. “If I did say yes. Would you say that there’s a chance that you might someday come to...tolerate me, or like me, just a little?”
The question is so wholehearted, so eager in its intentions, that it sends rocks tumbling around Lena’s stomach. “If you did say yes, you would come to live in my house with me, and be the face of my business. You would not enter my chambers, or touch me, or speak to me without my permission. And if,” Lena shakes her head. “If you follow those instructions down to the very last letter, we could, perhaps, find a certain accord.”

Clark is smiling in a way that doesn’t quite sit right with Lena. He looks assured of himself, almost, which he shouldn’t be. Lena wonders if Clark knows he’s making a deal with the devil. If he doesn’t yet, he will soon. “Okay, I’ll bite. I’ll do it. I accept your proposal.”

This is exactly her desired outcome. His ready answer still surprises Lena. She’s saved from a rare and embarrassing moment of ungroundedness by the entrance of the magistrate, a wiry man, with Ms. Huang coming presently at his heel.

“I hope you’ve prepared your vows, Mr. Danvers.” Lena smirks. Clark is back to his previous visage of a slack-jawed fish out of water, knocked off his previous, troubling pedestal.

“We’re getting...here? Now?” He tugs at the collar of his shirt. “This isn’t even my best shirt.”

Against his protests, Lena rises from her chair and summons Clark to do the same with a pointed look. The rest of it happens in Lena’s favorite way, like clockwork, or dominoes falling in a straight line. She greets the magistrate and requests Ms. Huang to remain as a witness. The magistrate positions himself next to the large, curtain-framed window, bible in hand, and adjusts his spectacles.

They stand in front of him. When he says, “You may join hands.” Lena reaches out and takes Clark’s into her grip. They’re calloused, a little damp. She tugs him slightly closer and watches him shift from foot to foot, visibly reddened.

“Are you nervous, Mr. Danvers?”

“Don’t you think you should call me Clark now, under the circumstances?” Clark’s eyes search her face and then move to her throat, the line of her dress. “This is the closest we’ve been since we were teenagers.”

“I don’t think I will.” Lena decides, and turns her head to the magistrate. “You can begin the ceremony.”

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“You did what?” The feminine voice that filters out from behind the door is brimming with rage. Lena winces, removing her scarf and craning her head to get a better look around the shop. She hasn’t been inside in years, and even before she attended only briefly. Much of it is the same—the bellows, the anvil, the slack tub. Some of it is new. The apprentice sitting stock still at the workbench with his eyes wide in terror, for instance.

He looks at her and she pinches her face into a glare.

“Alex, this was my choice.” Clark comes storming out of the door into the main workroom, bag in hand. “I’m a grown man.”

“The hell you are!” Alex follows him out, just as fired up, and grabs him by the collar of his shirt before he can take another step. “Did you even take a minute to think about what would become of this place without you here?”

“It’s going to be fine! You run your own business without me.” Clark breaks free of Alex’s grip and
blows through to the next room without sparing Lena or the apprentice as much as a cursory glance. “And Bart can take over the shop while I’m gone.”

“Bart?” Alex’s voice reaches new levels of hysteria. “You want to put the livelihood of your business into the hands of Bart?” She gestures to the apprentice, who blushes crimson. “We’ll go bankrupt, Clark!”

“We’re already bankrupt!” Clark yells from the other room. Lena peers in, still unnoticed by the quarreling pair. It’s a kitchen with a dirt floor and a cot set up in the corner. Clark is gathering clothes from his bed and throwing them into his bag. Lena shudders to think what it contains. “I’m doing this for us, Alex.”

Alex is leaning against the workbench when they emerge, head in her hands. “And what about your—your other thing, Clark?”

“Oh, I know about that.” All three heads whip to look at Lena. “Mr. Danvers is a bachelor of a certain age, there have certainly been rumors. And I’ve seen you with Mr. Schott.”

Clark’s mouth is hanging open and Alex looks like she’s about to bust out into laughter or tears. “Oh, she thinks you’re—okay. You know what? Good luck with this. You both have my blessing. But don’t come crying to me when this all blows up in your face, Clark Danvers.” Throwing her hands up, Alex exits and slams the door behind her. Clark remains frozen.

“What do you mean you’ve seen me with Mr. Schott?”

“Are you quite ready, Mr. Danvers? This place smells like dog urine.”

They exit back onto the Main Street, still bustling this early in the evening. There’s a distinct bite in the air. Lena pulls her jacket closer to herself.

“—just how men act Ms. Luthor, not that you would know.”

“I’m sorry, what are you talking about?” Lena hails their carriage, stepping aside to allow Clark to open the door for her.

“Myself and Mr. Schott. I think you may have misunderstood something.”

“No.” Lena says mildly. “I think I understood quite well.”

To say that her idea turns out to be somewhat half-baked is an understatement.

In the sense that she technically gets exactly what she wants, it goes over like gangbusters. With her tutelage, Clark becomes a more than adequate puppet head for her business. His light curls, wire rimmed glasses, and baby face make him trustable to a fault; her ruthless knowledge of the trading world makes him lethal.

However, in the sense that she now has a near complete stranger, and a man no less, living in her home—there’s less dividends to that equation. Having an unexpected border has a way of making one’s home feel smaller than it is. It’s not that Clark isn’t a courteous housemate—he is, more than she’d like him to be—but they do have a habit of running into each other more than she would anticipate in a home with 20 bedrooms.

Lena suspects that most of this is by Clark’s own design. He does respect the rules that she’d laid out
on their wedding day, but he also finds ways to circumvent them, sometimes without Lena noticing until it’s too late. They’ll eat breakfast together, for instance, and have something that apes a companionable conversation, and Lena won’t realize what’s happened until it’s over and Clark has left the room.

More troubling than her previous distaste at the idea of marrying a man is how agreeable she finds it. Clark being a good person, being kind to her, is a test on her resolve. Every night in bed she makes a promise to herself to redouble her efforts to put him back in his place.

This is a difficult oath to keep.

“I’ve been finding myself a little stir-crazy.” He admits to her, cracking an egg with his spoon at the breakfast table. He’s in his shirtsleeves, not quite yet all the way dressed for the day, and his cuffs are rolled up to expose his forearms. Lena finds herself unable to tear her gaze away, her own meal untouched. “I was thinking I might help the groundskeepers clear the brush from the garden this afternoon.”

“It would be a fitting job for you in that disgusting shirt.” Lena snatches an apple from the bowl on the table and begins to twist the stem from the top. “Didn’t we get you new clothes?”

Clark shakes his head. “Ms. Huang has been pinning back one of Mr. Luthor’s old vests on me for business meetings.”

“Give Ms. Huang your sizes and have her send for the tailor. Then put that shirt in the fire.”

The entire conversation turns out to be one enormous misfire. She happens to glance into the back garden through the window in her study, leafing through letters, and catches a glimpse of Clark working. He’s hauling brush to be used for the fire and raking up the last of the November leaves. Though it’s edging on bitterly cold outside, he’s forgone his jacket in favor of remaining in just his shirtsleeves.

Lena watches his body move until she catches herself and snaps the curtains shut, returning to her letters with a now burgeoning headache. It’s only increased when, later in the day, Clark returns from his adventures glowing with vigor and offers her a hand-gathered bouquet of chrysanthemums and Queen Anne’s lace. She looks him in the eye as she throws them into the wastebin.

His new wardrobe causes enough strife for her that she wishes she could go back and retrieve his old, sweat-stained shirts. He steps out of his chambers looking positively dashing. Even Ms. Huang has a faint blush on her cheeks.

“Do you think he’s really like they say he is?”

“It is peculiar, 26 and unwed. And so handsome.”

This incites a fresh round of giggles as they pour heated water into the basin. Lena sits off to the side in her robe, picking intently at her left pinky nail and pointedly not looking at the duo.
“I do prefer my men a little gruffer, though. It’s odd that he doesn’t seem to grow any hair on his face.”

“He’s still so cute. Do you think he’s a virgin?”

“To women, maybe. I could certainly show him a thing or two.”

Lena steps into the filled tub so harshly that it splashes water onto the faces and dresses of the maids, ending their conversation.

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Her descent into total insanity begins, like she figures these things must, before she can even realize what’s happening.

A steady-handed alchemist, Mr. Danvers begins to change things in her home and in her life. Small things at first, the equivalent of moving a vase two inches to one side, or fixing a crooked painting, but things nonetheless. He asks to change the color of the drapes in the drawing room, she agrees. They’re no longer dark red, but powder blue. He asks to read her a selection from a book of poetry, she agrees. He tells her afterwards that the passage reminds him of her, and she only calls him an idiot once. He presses flowers in the pages of the books that she’s reading, she doesn’t throw them away. Suddenly she’s a woman who keeps flowers.

At first she thinks of it like an ebbing away, a tide coming in and wearing at her defenses until she simply lacks the will to fight. But she comes to the startling realization, as she arranges a bouquet in the drawing room, that it’s something else entirely. There had been gaps left by Lex’s death, and even before that, black holes in the house that they’d tucked away never to be spoken of. Clark is simply filling in those gaps, pouring something of himself into them until they’re whole again. Subsequently, there is light in the house again. Subsequently, Lena laughs for the first time in months watching him fall off a stepping stool while fixing window trim. He looks back over his shoulder at her, grinning as if it was something he planned.

Clark will wander about the house as if to decide on which project he’ll focus his energies on next. It becomes something like a game, waking up in the morning and wonder where she’ll find him next, standing with his arms crossed behind his back and a ready suggestion at the tip of his tongue. “Don’t you think this room could use more light?” “What if the cooks were to have new aprons for Christmas?” Once, in the hallway of portraits, she comes upon him intently studying one of herself, her parents and her brother from when she was in her mid teens.

“This is how I remember you.” He says when she comes up beside him. He has a smile like a crooked painting. “You’re lovely here, but sad. Will there be another?”

She regards the portrait in question, her whole family dressed in dour colors, her own stern frown.

“What do you mean?”

“Another portrait. Of you and I, now that we’re married. Your parents have one.”

“My father and brother are dead, my mother has taken ‘ill’ to the South of France for the last three years. There’s nobody here to be a traditions keeper but me.” She shakes her head. “And I say no more portraits.”

“But,” Clark hastens to look again at her young face, forever immortalized in oils. “How will people know what you look like?”
Lena squints. “What do you mean?”

“You know, this is you when you were 16. But you’re 25 now. And what about when you’re 40, or 60?”

“I’m not sure I shall live to be 60.” She moves closer to the painting, inspecting. The artist has certainly captured her spirit, her juvenile face. That much will always stay the same. “And I don’t know anyone who would care to know what I looked like, anyway.”

Clark hums, unconvinced. “I might.” Is all he says, and it’s enough. The next day she makes an appointment with an artist to come, because perhaps he’s right. It has been a decade, after all.

And so it goes: vases moved, spaces filled, doors and curtains flung open to let in the daylight. Lena catches herself in her bedroom anticipating sitting down with her husband for dinner that evening and pinches her thigh so hard that it leaves a bruise.

Clark’s seemingly endless resilience and capacity for antics doesn’t help matters at all. Every day is a new test of if he can impress her or not. To be fair, he does have a remarkable cache of skills for a man so young, not that Lena would ever express that thought out loud.

“Ms. Luthor!” She catches him out of the corner of her eye waving from the back garden. Winn is with him, looking sour to see her, and they both have fencing swords in their hands. She steps out of the door from her study, watching her breath begin to condense immediately in the chill. “How would you like to see me beat Mr. Schott one-handed?” He’s wearing a cocky smile in direct opposition to Winn’s disgruntled look.

“I don’t care what you do as long as you’re not doing it in the drawing room.” Lena comments, but stays where she is.

“Clark, let’s go inside. I’m going to get my death out here. There’s snow on the ground.”

“Don’t be a baby.” Clark says, but doesn’t take his eyes off Lena’s face. He has one hand crossed behind his back and the other holding his fencing sword. The cold has rubbed color into his cheeks and dampened his hair—there’ll be fresh snow soon—he’s removed also his glasses to protect them, giving Lena an unobstructed view of his eyes. She has the urge to pinch her thigh again.

“Oh!” As quickly as the moment begins, it’s ended by the tip of Winn’s sword jabbing into Clark’s right shoulder. Everybody looks shocked, Lena barking out a peel of alarmed laughter as Clark crumples to the ground clutching his shoulder. He’s laughing too, although there are tears pricking the corner of his eyes. Winn seems the most distressed out of the three of them.

Clark puts on a show of being tough until Lena suggests that she take a look at the wound and then he’s warbling about how he needs somebody to take care of him. Lena rolls her eyes as she sits him down on the couch in the drawing room and pulls down his shirt to just reveal his injured shoulder. Clark grips at the linen to keep it from falling any further. Lena supposes he must be shy.

“I would have beat him, you know.” Clark sniffs. “Had I not been distracted.”

“Oh, certainly.” Lena shakes her head and touches the bruise-mottled skin with the pads of her fingers, watching goosebumps rise in their wake. Clark shivers almost imperceptibly.

“I mean it. I was seconds away, but you were wearing that brown dress—the one that brings out your eyes.”

“You’re being very bold for a man who was bested by a chum right in front of my very eyes.” The
ribbing is softer than what Clark is usually on the receiving end of. Lena senses that she may be losing her touch. Her hand is still lingering on the smooth skin of his shoulder.

“I would bring him back tomorrow and beat him then, if I thought would it would impress you.” Clark’s eyes search her face, moving between her eyes and lips. “I would do anything to gain your favor.”

“Nothing you could do would gain my favor.” She says. It’s a lie.

“You’re cruel to me. Why?”

“I think you enjoy it.”

He seems to take this to heart and only grows bolder. After a long visit with the Lords, she rounds the corner into the kitchens to find Clark leaning against a counter with a plate of pie in his hand. He’s smiling and tousled in that way he looks when he’s just come in from a long ride or clearing brush from the yard. He takes a bite of pie and makes an exaggerated, happy groan, to the vocal delight of whatever female cook is standing with him.

Lena clears her throat, heads turn. Clark’s face brightens at the sight of her. It only deepens Lena’s frown. He places the plate delicately on the counter, dips in deference to the cook, and plods happily over to where she stands.

“You’re home early.” He breathes. “I thought you’d be calling on the Lords for another hour more.”

“It was tedious.” Lena huffs, removing her gloves. “But I see you were occupying herself well in my absence.”

“Addie makes the best pecan pie in Canada.” He’s standing closer that she’d usually like, hands clasped behind his back, but she’s too vexed to make a comment on it. She clenches and unclenches the gloves in her fist.

“Pecan pie and the privilege of her smile, how charming.”

“Truth be told, I’d rather have the privilege of yours.” Clark sighs. Something hateful happens then, something completely undeniable—Lena’s heart quickens, not with distaste, but with pleasure.

“You’re pretty when you blush.” Lena realizes that she must be.

“You’re making a fool of yourself.” She bites out in a shaky voice. It doesn’t register above a whisper. “Being so bold.”

“Am I?” Clark totters a little forward. “Because you sounded a little jealous of Addie just then, if I’m not mistaken.” His sudden proximity gives Lena the rare opportunity to look at his face, to study it. For no reason at all, her maid’s comment about his lack of a beard pops into her head like the rotating blip of a lighthouse. There really isn’t a single hair on his upper lip or his chin, and not on his cheeks either, and not in the way that some men are clean-shaven. She remembers her father’s face, how she used to love running her hands over the stubble on his cheeks, even right after he’d shaved she could feel the pricks of a few errant hairs against her hand.

And yet on Clark, not even a follicle.

Blinking back into reality, Lena places a hand onto his chest to separate them. “You’re making a mistake, Mr. Danvers.” She says, then flees.
Clark’s room is a cluttered mess typical of men his age and disposition. The sheets on the four poster bed are tangled, not yet tended to by the maid, and his nightshirt and underwear are still lying heaped on the floor. He’d left only minutes ago to see Alex in the township, so Lena reckons that she has time. To that end doesn’t go immediately to the bathing room, but lingers for a moment in the main bedroom. She moves to Clark’s bedside, sits on the edge of his mattress and takes a book off the top of the stack that sits on the nightstand.

All the novels in his possession are clearly lovelorn and dog-eared, with small scraps of paper tucked into the crannies of favorite passages. Lena holds *Much Ado About Nothing* in her hands, feels the weight of it, then opens it to a randomly selected earmark. There’s a passage underlined several times in Clark’s careful hand.

*I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.*

Lena closes the book and throws it back onto the nightstand as if burned.

His bathroom, at least, is tidy. There’s a vanity inside, and a large copper tub still damp on the inside from that morning’s bath. There’s nothing on the surface of the vanity and, Lena notes, no hairs sticking to the ivory bowl there. It’s curious, but also possible that the servants had simply already rinsed it out. She opens nearly every cabinet and drawer on the piece of furniture before she comes across Clark’s shaving kit.

The blade is tucked away in it’s wooden box and when she opens the hinged cover, dust disperses into the air. Brow furrowed, Lena removes the razor and opens it, inspecting the blade. It’s almost certainly the one he’d brought with him to the blacksmith’s shop, and yet there’s not a dull inch of the steel blade, not a single nick on the edge of it. Frowning, Lena gently touches it with the pad of her thumb and finds it brutally sharp.

One more odd thing remains in the drawer: a piece of burlap, wrapped around something soft. Lena sets the razor down and reaches in to peel back the layers of fabric and reveal—a mass of stained rags? Her nose wrinkles in disgust and confusion as she picks up one of the tattered pieces of linen and looks closer. The fabric is mottled brown with blood, in fact, and it looks like--

*Oh.* Lena replaces everything in the drawer with a speed she didn't know she possessed and exits the bedroom just as quickly, shutting the door softly behind her. She's in such a tizzy that she very nearly smashes into a maid carrying clean linens down the hallway. "Are you feeling alright, Ms. Luthor? You look a little red."

"I'm fine." Lena says as she hurries past her and down the hallway. "A little hungry is all."

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Lena Luthor is not a stupid woman. And, by virtue of having been adopted, she possesses none of the familial madness that so plagued the Luthor clan for generations. Both of these things are true, and yet she cannot shake the suspicion that her new husband may actually be a woman. It’s an insane notion and yet—yet, she finds herself sitting at her vanity, hair brush in hand, wondering how it would be if it *were* true. If she were to peel back Clark’s shirt, and underneath find—run her hands over—

It starts as a fever that she hopes can be extinguished by one question answered: “Would it be possible for you to procure your birth record for me?”

Clark’s face twists. “For what?”
“The bank has been requesting it, so I can open that account you’ve been wanting.” Lena dabs at her mouth with a napkin. “To send funds to Ms. Danvers.”

“Yes, alright.” Clark agrees, and Lena hears the familiar and comforting sound of him cracking his egg, taking a long sip of his coffee. Something in her stomach settles. Of course, it was foolish for her to think—based only off the quality of a razor and some bloody rags, no less. It speaks if nothing else to the state of her mind since her brother’s death and Clark’s arrival at the mansion. “It is a copy though, will that be a problem? My original birth record was destroyed in the fire that killed my family, but the Danvers made me a new one when I came to live with them.”

Lena nearly drops her coffee into her lap.

Finding out the location of Clark’s origin is not difficult, as her husband is nothing if annoyingly eager to share the minutiae of his life with her. She only has to ask once and he’s regaling her with stories of a small Canadian village nearly destroyed by a fire, the hero Danvers family taking him in as an infant. She receives the copy of his birth record exactly as promised, his name scribbled in his foster mother’s hand: **Clark Jeremiah Danvers**, his birthday the winter solstice, his birthplace the same little village he’d described to her in such vivid detail.

She gives the certificate to Ms. Huang, who seems sure that she’ll be able to find the village in question given a couple days for asking about and travel. Lena leaves her with very clear instructions: seek out the church, if there is one, ask after their records. The bank is not satisfied with the copy, and wants proof from the church where Clark was registered as a baby. Her husband has said that the fire destroyed the church but just to be sure, to untangle any unnecessary complications. Luckily for her Jessica Huang is as discreet and loyal as they come and doesn’t voice any objections, if she has any.

In the meantime, Lena has her own investigation to conduct. She doesn’t confess to know much about men, having devoted much of her life to the rejection of them. But Lena Luthor is also no ingenue.

“Come in.”

The door squeaks open and Clark pokes his head around. He’s wearing a loose linen shirt, britches, and a pair of suspenders, and his glasses sloped low on his nose. “You asked to see me, Ms. Luthor?”

“Yes.” Lena smiles faintly and pats the seat next to her on the couch. “Come sit with me.”

Clark hesitates. “Are you being quite serious?”

“Yes, Mr. Danvers. You’ve been gone all afternoon. I’ve...noticed your absence.”

Looking around as if to catch somebody waiting in the wings to humiliate him, Clark cautiously begins to cross the room. “Are you sure you’re not playing a prank on me?”

Lena shakes her head and pats the sofa again. The cushions shift and dip under Clark’s weight when he sits, drawing them closer together on the already confined space of the couch. He smells fresh and clean, his shirt probably just washed that morning, and Lena can’t help but lean in just a little. She takes another sip from her whiskey to re-center herself.

“We’ve been married almost a month now.”

“It seems we have.” Clark remains stiff, but slackens by the minute.
“You know, most men, were they in your position, wouldn’t be as chivalrous as you have.”

“I guess I’m not most men.”

Humming, Lena leans back to regard Clark, all of him. His body is cast in the warm glow from the fireplace and the candles that illuminate the space and he’s looking at her intently. His eyes, usually blue, are dark. “No, you’re--what’s the word people use, an avowed bachelor? A man of specific mannerisms? A midnight botanist?”

“I know that’s what people say about me, but I assure you I’m none of those things.” Seemingly lured into a false sense of security, Clark has twisted his body to face Lena’s and is allowing it to sink into hers. He’s warm, like a furnace.

“I thought you might say that.” Lena admits. “To be honest, I’ve been confused. You haven’t made a secret of your interest in me.”

“Well, Ms. Luthor--”

“You can call me Lena, now, I think.” Lena places her palm on Clark’s thigh, right above his knee. She delights in the way he squirms, adjusting his glasses and glowing red even in the waning light of the room. One last sip of her drink, and it’s discarded onto her desk. “You are, aren’t you? Attracted to me, I mean.”

“Who wouldn’t be.” Clark breathes.

“I find you agreeable as well, against my better judgement.” This admission seems to startle Clark, Who flounders for a moment. He reaches up to fuss with his glasses. Lena’s hand creeps just an inch higher on his thigh, opening flat and squeezing. There’s a wonderful mass of muscle alive under her palm. “You’ve been quite the surprise to me, Clark Danvers.”

“Ms—Lena—“

“Is something wrong? Do you want me to stop?”

“No. No, I just…”

Lena folds herself in, brushing her lips against the shell of his ear, and speaks. “If I asked you to come upstairs into my bedroom with me, you would?” It’s a Hail Mary sort of thing, being that Lena is completely unsure what she’ll do if Clark agrees. And part of her wants Clark to agree, the same part that wants her ludicrous hunch to be right, and the same part that wonders what she’ll find if she moves her hand a little further north.

Clark’s hand covers hers, stopping it in its tracks. Not removing it, or shifting it, just ceasing it’s movement. He looks at her through his eyelashes (they’re long, lightly colored. Lena can’t stop noticing things about his face). She takes her other hand and cups his cheek, his chin, feeling. She runs her thumb over his lips. Clark removes that, too, uncurls her fingers and places a kiss in the center of her palm. His grip is strong and confident. It sends pins and needles through her body.

“I wish I could say yes.” He whispers. Lena sucks in a breath and allows herself one moment to lean into his warmth, but even that feels too indulgent. She pulls her hands away in an instant, standing from the couch abruptly. The room is suddenly too hot with the two of them and the fire roaring on in the hearth. It stings like rejection against her common sense. “Lena, please—don’t be upset.”

“I’m not upset.” Lena says, placing a hand over her breastbone and taking a deep, fortifying breath. “I’m just startled, is all. Could you give me a moment, please?”
“Lena—“

“Clark.” She says, voice a whisper. “One moment, please.”

He acquiesces and bows respectfully from the room. Lena locks it behind him, then pours her glass of whiskey until it’s full to the brim.

Although Jess is gone and come back in a span of 5 days, Lena sits on pins and needles waiting for her. Clark’s bluster is all but gone since their night in the study and he seems more cautious now than he was before. Gone is the rambunctious person who would eat a stone from the garden if only to curry her favor, replaced by somebody much more withdrawn.

On the fifth day, when Ms. Huang does return early in the morning, Lena then must wait all day to get a moment alone with her. It’s a tedious, stressful dance that leaves her unable to focus on other, more pressing matters. When the day finally ends and she’s able to steal away with Ms. Huang to the privacy of her bedrooms, it’s a physical relief.

“Well,” Lena eggs her on, brushing out her hair at the vanity. She’s dressed down into her chemise. Her maid stands behind her, looking hesitant. “Spit it out, Jess. What did you find out, was his birth record there?”

“Well, no.” Jess admits. “The church was certainly there, and they’ve retained all of their records for the last 75 years or so. I actually didn’t even have to look at their record at first—the pastor was there, he remembers the fire that Mr. Danvers was referring to.”

The fire hadn’t touched the church, but of course it hadn’t. It affected one section of the village, and killed six people, one of whom was a man with a baby who’s wife had died giving birth some weeks before. “He insists it was a baby girl.” Jess says. “And he showed me the birth registry—he’s right. It’s a small village, only one baby was born on the solstice that year, Baby Girl Parsons. I even checked the next six months, there was only one other birth, also a girl.”

“And you’re quite sure it’s the right village?”

“He remembers the Danvers.” Jess says. “He can’t say exactly what happened to the baby who survived the fire, but he remembers that the Danvers adopted a baby who’d been orphaned before they moved. It’s all so strange—Ms. Luthor, are you crying?”

“Oh God, I’m so relieved.” Lena wipes a tear from the corner of her eye. “All this time, I thought—that I had begun to have feelings for—this is the best news I’ve received in all my life.”

Jess squints. “Are we still talking about the bank?”

“Yes.” Lena sobs, burying her face into her face into her hands. “Now I won’t have to set up an account for Mr. Danvers, saving myself an enormous headache. He can deal in paper money for the time being.”

“Do you need some time alone?”

“Yes, please!”

When Jess leaves, Lena allows herself a moment to dwell on the strangeness of it all. She’s always been a fan of the odd, the otherworldly, stories of the truly bizarre. She reflects on herself as a child, reading books of witches and omens, and thinks that it’s only fitting that something so uncanny
would happen to her in her own life. She had, after all, been dogged by bad luck since a child. And for anybody else this might be considered a stroke of misfortune, but perhaps her own singularity had finally flipped the tables.
Kara

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Being born on the winter solstice and having killed her mother doing it, Kara is no stranger to cursed things. She herself is an omen, and she’d come to affectionately refer to the strange events that happened around her as *gray magic*. The first consequence of it is the fire that kills her father. The next is the Danvers family taking her in. Of course, there’s so much more after that, strange thing piled on strange thing. But it’s useful for her to delineate into two distinct points in her life, the first starting with the Danvers taking her in and everything that happens after.

Nobody tells her that she’s cursed outright, but there are signs. She learns to read quickly and against her parent’s wishes, her hair is blonde, and she has a penchant for books about romance and adventure. If this is a burden on her new family, nobody mentions it to her. Eliza and Jeremiah knew of her mother and father and spoke of them often, although Kara had no conception of anybody else having ever been her parents. Even then they tried to codify her by her parent’s traits—her narrow hips, like the ones that killed her mother, her ghoulish moods. All she’d ever wanted was to have Jeremiah’s stern brow and Eliza’s curiosity for things unseen. To be like Alex.

That was another part of the gray magic—to exist in liminal spaces. In the family but never really a part of it.

“*Ow!*” Alex jabs her with the pointed end of her switch, and when Kara crumples she bends the end and lets it release to slap a welt over the skin of her back. Kara shrieks. “Alex, stop it! I’m going to tell mom.”

“Baby.” Alex taunts, and strikes her again. “Dad is never going to let you learn how to make swords if you can’t even beat me in a fake fight.”

She’s right. Damnit if Alexandra Danvers is ever wrong. Shoulder burning, Kara stands and gathers her weapon from the long meadow grass—a long piece of green, flexible wood, to match Alex’s—and stands in position. They’re tussling again before long, like 9 and 12 year olds do. Sword fighting that devolves into hitting that devolves into rolling around on the dirt basin of the meadow. Alex beats her, being bigger, and rolls Kara onto her stomach. She sits straddling her, trapping her arms against her sides, and uses her hands to shove Kara’s face into the soil.

Kara cries out and tastes the dirt moist in her mouth. It rubs into her chin and nose. When Alex lets up she turns her face, whole body convulsing in an attempt to buck her off. “Mom’ll spank you raw, Alex Danvers!”

“Oh yeah?” Alex rubs her face into the dirt again. “What if dad catches you wearing trousers? He’ll have you, too.”

Alex Danvers is right. She’s always been the smart one in the family. Jeremiah does catch her wearing britches, a pair she’d stolen, and switches her for it until she bleeds. There will be no lessons in his shop for at least a week. Kara cries bitterly, not about the switching, but the britches. She’d worked so hard for them, stolen them herself, and Jeremiah took them like they meant nothing at all to her.

When the time comes that Eliza takes her to the creek after luncheon, she doesn’t lodge any complaints about being too old to be accompanied to bathe. Kara strips from her plain skirts and
chemise and allows Eliza to tut over the risen welts on her bum and the wound on her chin before she steps into the water.

“You look sad today, chicken.” Kara fills a tin bucket and dumps it over her head, wetting herself. Her back is turned to Eliza, sat on a rock at the creek bed. “Was he too rough with you?”

“He took my trousers.” Kara says sharply, snatching up the soap bar from a rock to run through her hair. “I don’t care that he switched me, but he took the trousers.”

“What use are they to you, anyway? I can make you any pretty thing you want.”

“I don’t want a pretty thing.” Kara huffs. She lifts the bucket, sloshing with creek water, and pours it over her sudsy head. “I want britches. That’s what I want.” She blinks the moisture out of her eyelashes, not daring to turn and look at Eliza. She knows the disappointment and confusion she’ll see on her mother’s face, the reason she’ll always be classed with her birth parents instead of a true Danvers. She looks down at her breasts, peas on a board as Alex had referred to them, and frowns. She loves them. She’s not sure she wants them to grow.

“They will, though.” Alex says, pulling her hair tightly back into a ponytail. “You’ll get hips too. The boys will love you then.” It’s a harrowing thought. Her sister sounds unconvincing saying it.

“And what else?”

“You get crushes and things.” Alex clears her throat, moving to stand in front of Kara and sweep at her shoulders. “On boys—oh don’t be sour, Kara. Come look at yourself.”

Kara allows herself to be guided to the full length mirror in the bedroom. She hates to be Alex’s dress up doll on most occasions but when her sister had suggested this she’d jumped at the chance, not even trying to play coy. Her hair is pulled back and short looking. She’s wearing her chemise tucked into her trousers, with Jeremiah’s socks and large vest hanging off her frame. Kara has no words for the sensation of longing she has looking at herself.

“Wow.” Alex steals the sound from her mouth. “You look like a real boy.”

“I’m not a boy.”

“I know. You look like one, though.”

A gust of agitation rattles her and the clothes that were once comforting feel suffocating. Kara begins to strip them off piece by piece, dropping them on the floor at Alex’s feet. Alex picks them up in her wake, lips thin, and deposits them on the bed.

“You’re a handsome boy, if it makes any difference at all.” She says as Kara throws logs in the fireplace at the foot of their bed to begin a fire. It’s early springtime and the nights still skew toward being bitterly cold. Alex draws the curtains. “Like one of the characters in your books.” Kara smiles at that, beginning to stir a proper flame in the chimney. “Can we read a little tonight?”

“If Eliza finds them you know she’ll be cross.” But when she turns around, Alex is already tucked into bed. She looks expectant. Kara’s agitation is replaced by a river of adoration. Instead of floating in her liminal space she’s tethered to earth in that moment by her sister’s love.

She reaches between the mattress and bed frame and retrieves their most recent dalliance. Crawling into bed, Kara opens the paper and thread-bound pages to the spot marked by a piece of fabric.

“Where did we leave off again?”
“A young lady caught the attention of Mr. Clark Wescott, but he’s living a double life as a masked thief.”

“Hmm.”

“And the young lady knows the masked thief and hates him because he stole from her family, though she loves Mr. Wescott.”

Alex leans her head on Kara’s shoulder and listens attentively as she begins the story, whispering as so not catch the attention of their parents. In Kara’s voice, Mr. Wescott as the thief saves his lady love from certain death, she unknowing that the dastardly thief is also the man of her dreams. He kisses her hand, and the next day brings a bouquet of flowers to her recovery bed.

Long asleep, Alex drools on the neckline of Kara’s chemise. Kara’s eyes remain on the words, mouthing them. When sleep begins to drag her under she places a piece of fabric there, adds it to the collection of others in the book. A scene where Mr. Wescott captures the lady’s attention with a magic trick, where he impresses her by beating his foe in a sword fight. To put herself asleep she creates her own story out of those pieces with herself as the protagonist. Kara Danvers, a hero with two identities, and her lady love. It’s a nice enough thought.

“Just like that, Kara—good.” Kara pulls the hardened piece of metal from the finishing tub and smiles. The horseshoe is solid and execution and bears their family insignia. Jeremiah is flushed with pride, clapping his daughter on the shoulder. “Keep it up like this, and you’ll be better than me in a year’s time.”

Kara carries the praise like a medal. Jeremiah brings out jerky and cheese for luncheon and they eat in companionable silence on the front steps of the shop, watching people go by. This is how it often goes: not much to talk about, but enjoying each other’s company all the same. Kara looks at her father’s arms, riddled with scars from his years as a smith, and indulges in a fantasy of hers looking the same.

“You know.” Jeremiah begins around a mouthful of cheese. “Maybe we ought to get you a pair of trousers. Just to wear while you’re with me in the shop.”

Kara’s heart speeds. “I thought you hated me wearing them.”

“It’s not practical for you to be in frocks when you’re helping in the shop.” He reasons. “Anyway, you’re 16 now. You’ll be married soon enough. It’s only temporary.”

“Are you really so excited for me to be married and leave you?” Kara frowns. “I’m not sure why I should have to, when you’re here to take care of us.”

“I won’t be here forever.”

They resume their day afterwards, working over the forge until they have to trot home for dinner. His words pass in and out of Kara’s head like a breeze, said with the aloofness of a man who doesn’t believe them to be true. All she knows is that she’ll be getting trousers, and has her father’s approval. It’s enough.

Jeremiah dies on a Sunday.
It’s sudden enough to almost be mundane. Eliza comes into their bedroom, robe clutched about her, and says that Alex needs to come into her room right this instant. When Kara swings her legs over the side of the bed and grapples for something to wear Eliza stops her with a hand on her wrist. She shakes her head, eyes wild. There is no need for church that day.

They manage to battle off the sense of impending dread until after he’s buried, a Tuesday, because it’s late springtime and hot enough that a body won’t keep for more than a day. Alex doesn’t speak a word until after the funeral, when Kara is undoing the stays of her corset in the privacy of their bedroom. Already dressed down, Kara wears her nightgown and her hair in loose waves around her shoulders. Alex is still in full mourning regalia, her black dress and plain crown braid.

“I’m going to marry Maxwell Lord.” Kara’s fingers stutter on the laces. She continues, and the corset slackens. Alex breathes greedily. “He’s asked me and I will say yes.”

“Alex—“

“Don’t.” Her voice is cracking, allowing water to slip through. She bows her head into the cradle of her palms. “Don’t say it, Kara, don’t. I mean it.”

Kara hastily crouches beside her, taking one calloused hand between two of her own and causing Alex to look up. Her face is red and puffy with tears and all at once Kara thinks that she can’t stand another moment of it. Not another moment of listening to Eliza’s broken sobs through the thin walls of their home, of watching Alex waver in and out of reality. Kara is sick with it. “It doesn’t have to be like this—“

“God.” The word comes out of Alex as a jagged thing. Kara flinches back and watches as her sister stands, wrenching her hand away. The corset falls from her torso and clatters to the floor. “Is it possible for you to stop with this nonsense? Even now? Or are you bound to it?”

“It’s not nonsense, Alex.” Kara persists. “I’m matched with Jeremiah in skill, and—“

“What good is it? What does it matter? You could be the best blacksmith in the world, and you would still be a woman. A 16 year old girl.”

“But what if I wasn’t.” Kara’s voice cracks around the words. Alex stares back at her, mute, then laughs with flat eyes.

“You’ve gone mad with grief.”

“I’m not mad with anything. You said it yourself, with my hair short and in pants—"" I was joking, Kara, good Lord!”

“Maybe it isn’t a joke.” Kara opens her hands flat against the rough grain of Alex’s chair. “I’m no good to you and Eliza as I am, but as a son? Or a brother? Come here, Alex.”

Stunned, Alex does come. She seats herself back in the chair, facing Kara and moving her hands to rest on her knees. Kara’s head follows suit and soon she’s being cradled in Alex’s lap, her sister’s hands resting on her head. She didn’t realize until that moment how hard her heart was thundering or how dry her mouth had become. The balm of Alex’s touch, the motion of her body, relaxes both of them. “I don’t mean to sound cross with you. But I don’t understand.”

“You don’t want to marry Mr. Lord, do you? Not really.”

“No.”
"You and I could go a few towns over, use what money Jeremiah left us and get a storefront.” Kara tastes the linen of Alex’s dress against her mouth as she talks. “Between me as a smith and you sewing up wounds—it wouldn’t be much, but we’d have enough to send home to Eliza, and some for us.”

“You’ve gone off the deep end.” Alex says, but her words don’t hold the conviction of her earlier outburst. “But I guess I must be as well.”

“You’ll hear me out?” Kara lifts her head from Alex’s lap and regards her with shining eyes. Alex slouches back into the chair and presses a hand into her forehead. “What else am I going to do?” She says, muffled. “Marry Mr. Lord?”

Kara laughs out loud and the world tilts a little to be righter on its axis than before.

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“Are you certain of this, Kara? There’ll be no going back.”

“Do it.” Kara matches her own steely gaze in the reflection of the enamel hand-mirror, tilting it to catch Alex’s trepidation. A little more slant and she sees Eliza sat in the corner of the kitchen, saying nothing and tapping her fingers against her mouth.

Alex’s hand grips at the base of her skull where her ponytail is cinched. She gives a firm tug. Kara winces, eyes catching the glint of the kitchen knife in her other hand. “Are you sure we can’t do it with scissors?”

“All we have are Eliza’s for sewing.”  Never one to mince words, Alex pulls the knife against Kara’s hair. It makes a raw sound. Kara and Eliza flinch.

“Alex, do be careful—“

“It’s alright, mom.” Kara feels a loss as a portion of her hair falls away, followed by the other half under Alex’s quick motions. At last, it’s all gone— Alex holds her ponytail up for Kara to see in the mirror. The heat of two gazes is on her. Plus her own, inspecting the line of hair that tickles the skin above her jaw. She thinks of Mr. Wescott, imagines her hair as his. Kara feels like a mirror covered in condensation that’s been half wiped away. There’s nothing else to do but plumb deeper down until the reflection is clear.

Alex opens her mouth to speak but it takes a moment for her words to catch up. “How’s that, then?”

“Shorter.” Kara insists in a stripped voice.

“Do it like the young boys have it now.” Kara and Alex both turn to look at Eliza. Her expression is restrained but her eyes are bright. “They all like it wild and romantic. But a little shorter than that.”

“Shorter it is.” Alex picks up Eliza’s thread scissors, silver and shaped as a hummingbird, and gives them an experimental snip. “I’d put the mirror down for a moment, Kara. It’s going to get worse before it gets better.”

——

The tentative knock at the door startles Kara. It’s well past 10 in the evening and Alex is already asleep, making a misshapen lump under the bedcovers. The only thing that keeps Kara lingering on into the night is her freshly washed hair, still damp. She takes quiet steps to the door and opens it a crack, revealing Eliza’s smiling face.
“Can I come in?”

It’s odd. Eliza hasn’t been in their room since they were girls. She’d respected it as a private sanctuary once Alex became a teenager, and certainly not ever come wandering in past 10 unannounced. “Of course.”

Eliza takes one step but not any further. Out of the shadow of the hallway Kara observes that she’s holding a small bundle in her arms. “For you.” She says. Kara takes one of the parcels and sees that it’s a tin filled with pomade. “They were your father’s things. I thought you might find them useful.”

Longing cuts sharp when she unscrews one of the lids and inhales, smelling only Jeremiah. She gathers the load and deposits it on the vanity, pretending not to notice when Eliza stoops next to Alex to drop a kiss onto her forehead. Alex would hate it were she awake and knowing. But asleep she fusses and burrows to her mother’s touch.

“I hate to think you girls are leaving me.” Eliza says. “But I suppose you aren’t girls anymore. Alex is a woman, and you—“

“I’m still a girl.” Kara sweeps a hand through her damp, curly hair.

“Do you remember when I used to take you down to the creek and bathe you? Alexandra always hated it. But you loved to sit and talk with me. In the summer we might be out there for hours.”

“I remember.”

“You always had a touch of something different in you. I’m not surprised that things are the way they are. I am and I’m not.”

“What about Alex?”

“Alex is different, too.”

Before she leaves Eliza wraps Kara in a hug.

“We’ll always take care of you.”

“I know.” Eliza says. “When I write to you, what name should I use?”

“Clark.” Kara prays that someday the name will sound natural coming out of her mouth. Eliza flinches as if she’d inflicted a physical wound.

“I gave you your name, your mother never did and your father never did, but I gave it to you. You’ve always been my Kara. My strange, lovely Kara.”

Kara watches her ghost disappear into the dark wisps of the house. Her bare neck is cold. Jeremiah is nowhere to be found but the graveyard. Her home, the creek bed, the field where Alex had bested her again and again, all felt like they might not be there if she took a step out of their front door. All gone before she could decide on her own to give them up.

There’s something exhilarating about it at first. To Kara it’s as if she’s living out a scene from one of her novels, run away as a teenager with her sister, her identity an assumed one. Eating hardtack and coffee, sleeping on a cot. Being called Mr. Danvers. The first time Alex refers to her as Clark in public. Eliza still calls her K in her letters home, unwilling to give up entirely the name she’d gifted
her as a baby. Kara doesn’t mind. In a world where so much has changed, it’s comforting to be able to trace her finger over the form of her old life.

Weeks tear by until they don’t. Kara doesn’t realize the impact of her new identity until she does. She’d found Alex’s fretting over it strange—what should it matter if it meant that she would never be married, or have a lover? Why would that be important when she felt so comfortable in her new skin? She walked taller, talked easier, worked harder. But there were things, little instances, that would itch at her like somebody blowing a breath against her nape.

Girls came into her shop with their fathers and bat eyelashes or bring mincemeat pies. Ones that Kara would hungrily consume sitting on her cot later on into the evening. They would peak into the windows with their friends and abscond when caught, squealing all the way down the Main Street.

“They like you.” Alex rolls her eyes, taking Kara’s wrist in her grip and turning her forearm to inspect the long, thin burn curling around its circumference. They’re in the back room of the shop where Alex does her business, pulling teeth and sewing wounds for those who can’t or won’t pay for a medical doctor. “You need to be more careful over the forge.”

“I am careful.”

“This is going to hurt. Do you want something to bite on?”

Kara shakes her head. Alex uncorks a bottle of grain alcohol with her teeth and, without pleasantries, pours it over the wound. The pain is incredible. Kara doesn’t puke like she used to. “What do you mean they like me?” She bites out, making conversation to distract from the throbbing as Alex wraps her arm in clean cloth.

“They want to marry you.”

“Shut up.”

“You asked.”

Perhaps the biggest blessing of all is that they were able to have separate sleeping spaces—Kara in the kitchen and Alex in the back room. Space could be a wonderful soothe for picking at each other.

“Are you done?”

Alex shrugs. There’s leftover blood and plasma saturating the white bandages and a phantom discomfort that goes in and out with her heartbeat. “Keep it off your cot and watch for it to leak pus.”

“Do you really think they want to marry me?”

Alex raises an eyebrow. “What does it matter to you? Do you want to marry them?”

“Don’t be stupid.” She knows immediately she should have said nothing at all, that she should have known it would betray her interest. Once Alex is on her scent it’s difficult if not impossible to shake her. The next time she sees Eloise Flanders peeking around her window, she allows herself the pleasure of being noticed and decides, then and there, not to mention it to Alex ever again.

It’s easy until it’s not.

The dark haired girl waiting outside the bank building escapes Kara’s attention the first two or three times she scans the horizon. When she notices her she becomes the focal point of her gaze, beyond Winn and the card game they’re playing at his stall, beyond the hustle of the main drag on a spring midday.
“Clark, are you listening?” Winn sounds peevish, his natural disposition. A slight boy of 17 years, and an unwilling partner in his father’s fur trade business, he wears shirts and trousers a size too big for him and a raccoon skin hat that covers his ears.

“Yes.” Kara says. Winn raises an eyebrow. “Sorry, no. Can you hold on a second?” Frantically gathering up the playing cards and not taking her eyes off of the dark haired girl, Kara rises so quickly that her stool tumbles over behind her. Against Winn’s protests, she beats a path to where she stands, looking bored, and makes herself known.

“Hello.” A little bow. The girl looks startled but composes herself. “I’m Clark Danvers.” She glances over her shoulder to the bank, as if expecting somebody to come out any moment. Kara takes the moment to drink in the finer details of her appearance. She’s in a green frock and cape, and when she turns back her eyes are green too, and her skin is pale and delicate looking. There’s a sliver of skin peeping from between the fabric of her gloves and dress.

“Lena Luthor.”

“I haven’t seen you around here before.”

“I don’t generally make a habit of coming into town with my mother. But I had a yen today.”

The conversation drops into silence. For no reason at all Kara decides that she must do something to keep Lena’s interest, to detain her for a moment longer. She grasps around the deck of cards in her hand.

“Would you like to see a magic trick?” It’s a stupid thing to say. Kara doesn’t know any magic tricks. She barely can play gin rummy. Lena glances over her shoulder again and, so satisfied that her mother isn’t coming, shrugs. There’s a bored expression on her face that Kara wants to transmute. She wants it in that moment more than she’s ever wanted anything in her life, including pants.

“Show me what you have.” Kara has cards, gumption, and not much else. She extends the deck.

“Pick a card.” Lena does, glances at it, and keeps it cupped in a gloved hand. Kara fumbles a little with the next bit of her improv routine. Lena catches it, hawk-eyed, and her lips tick up into a smirk.

“Do you have it memorized? Put it back.” Once she has, Kara shuffles the deck against her thigh and cards go spraying everywhere. She feels tendrils of embarrassment begin to creep into her stomach. They’re stymied by the sound of a giggle, Lena’s, as she watches the cards go askew with delighted eyes. Kara smiles bashfully up and her, holding the remaining cards in her hand, and prays for a miracle.

Lena is stifling a laugh with her lips folded into a straight line. Kara lifts a card to show her. She doesn’t need to say the words is this your card? Lena is already shaking her head, bubbling over with mirth. Kara turns the card to look at it herself and sees that it’s the queen of hearts.

“Lena!” A woman emerges from the bank and seizes Lena by the arm, causing her to stumble. Her face is stern and she eyes Kara with thinly veiled disgust. “What in earth are you doing?”

“Nothing, mother. I was just—“

“You weren’t anything. What did I tell you about talking to strangers?” Kara realizes belatedly that her heart is hammering and her face must be flushed. Lena’s mother hasn’t referenced her but her mordant look is enough to inflict shame. Lena must feel it too. Her gaze is averted and stays on the ground as her mother all but drags her to a waiting carriage.
For an insane moment, Kara actually considers going after her. It would be a sight better than a standing in the middle of the road surrounded by cards and looking struck by lighting. If there exists a delineation between the two cleaving parts of Kara’s life, it doesn’t happen between her birth and becoming Clark Danvers. It happens between her birth and meeting Lena Luthor, the woman who will be her wife, which Kara knows in that moment without knowing it at all. It’s the gray magic, the curse, the omen. It’s the moon and the stars and everything else.

Kara watches her carriage disappear and does nothing. She’ll have another chance.

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“Alex— Alex—“

“Lord, Kara what is it?” Alex jolts over, tossing the blankets off in her haste. “It must be half past 11!”

It is, but Kara’s earlier interaction with Lena left her buzzing with light for the rest of the day. She’d nearly burned herself for a second time making horseshoes that afternoon, and no amount of tossing and turning in the kitchen could put her to bed. When she closed her eyes, all she saw was Lena curbing a giggle behind her hand.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Well, I can’t help you with that.”

“Give me some whiskey, will you?”

Grunting, Alex reaches under her cot and produces a opaque bottle. She thrusts it into Kara’s hand. “And scoot over.” Kara is already worming her way into the bed.

“You’re being a pest.” Alex says as she rolls over, creating a space where Kara fits like a glove. Nestled and content, she takes a long drag of the whiskey and lets it burn its way down her throat and to the tips of her fingers.

In the silence, Kara mulls over the best time to say her piece. She closes her eyes, body still trilling with alcohol, and sees Lena Luthor and her fine silk frock again. She’d never admired dresses much as a girl but the green fabric left a dent in her heart that she was trying to feel the shape of.

“Alex.” She says finally, after a chasm of quiet. “It’s occurred to me that I’m to die a virgin.”

Alex springs up as if touched by a hot coal and searches for her in the darkness of the room. When she finds her, she pinches the skin of her shoulder and twists. “And you’re deciding to fret over this now?” She hisses into the dark. “Not before we gave you a pretty boy cut and changed your name?”

“It hadn’t really occurred to me!” Kara’s shoulder is warm and throbbing. She rubs it with her hand. “But I met a young lady today, and I suppose—”

Kara shrieks when, before she can finish her sentence, Alex is thrashing her with a pillow. She hadn’t predicted an outcome this fierce and kicks herself for being surprised. They tussle for a moment like in their girlhood until Alex seems to tire of it and flops down, panting. “It was girls all along. If I’d known that you would change tune at the first one looking at you, I would’ve protested harder.”

“My tune isn’t changed!” Kara feels wounded that her sister would even insinuate it. It’s not all the way the truth, though—there is something different, but it’s not her choice to become Clark Danvers.
It resides deeper in her soil than that. “It’s the same tune, just—more colorful.”

Alex snorts, rolls over. Kara can feel the way she creates a dugout when there’s not an inch of space between them. “Whatever it is, we made a commitment to each other when we left. I hope you’re able to keep it on your end.”

By the grace of God the first time she sees Lena Luthor isn’t the last. There’s no saying what compels Mr. Luthor to begin getting horseshoes from Kara’s shop, nor why he himself comes in person to collect the goods when so many others would send a servant. There’s no saying but Kara has her private convictions. She finds him to be a personable, soft type of man, endeared to her even more because he brings his daughter.

And then she finds herself endeared again to him for having produced his daughter. How strange it is to be so aware of another person’s place in the world. When Mr. Luthor talks to her about the ideal dimensions of his rapier, Kara’s eyes track Lena inspecting the different mechanisms of the shop. She’s not shy, sticking her fingers places, picking things up and setting them down. Her father will break away to show her the imprint Kara uses to make leaf decals on iron wrought fences, explaining quietly how hot metal will bend to the will of the shape. More often than not, Lena emerges from the day covered in soot and smelling metallic.

“Your mother will have my hide when she sees you.” Mr. Luthor cups her chin, pinches her ruddy cheeks. Lena beams. Kara soaks it up from the background, sleeves pulled about her elbows. A long ways in the future, Kara will wonder what Lena thinks of these moments, or if she thinks about them at all. To her Kara may as well have been a poor, scrawny boy showing her magic tricks to capture even the briefest moment of her interest, one of dozens, a sea of misguided suitors.

The crush exists in her for nearly a decade. Kara grows from her strange boyhood as Clark to a man called Mr. Danvers. Her body never betrays her. It remains lean and takes on muscle as she toils in the shop, new scars whip around her arms, Alex scrubs blood from the wood floors of her operating room. They make money and they lose money.

The body is a wonderful, mysterious animal. Kara has been on the receiving end of enough lingering glances to know that she’s desirable. She’s desirable even to herself, no longer a gawky girl of 16 ill at ease in her frocks and tangled braids. The short, romantic crop of her hair and cut of her white shirts flatter her. Of course, back then, she couldn’t have imagined the marvel of a woman’s hands brushing the skin of her forearm. She wonders if she’s greedy for wanting both; herself, and somebody to love her knowing that Clark isn’t the sum total of her parts.

Alex tells her she’s been reading too many romance novels. Maybe that’s why Lena remains as a seed in her heart, dormant and never sprouting, and why Kara can’t shake the feeling that they might like each other if they ever really got to talking. Of course, they don’t, because to talk to Clark Danvers would be stooping below Lena’s station. Kara observes all the same. Lena grows from a cheeky little girl to a woman made chiefly of her sorrows. Mr. Luthor passes. Mrs. Luthor retires to France, never to return. When her brother passes, there’s a ripple through the town that reverberates in Kara.

“You don’t even know her.” Alex insists, hands in the mouth of a fur trapper. “I don’t understand how you can be so enamoured with her.”

“I’m not enamoured. It’s just a little—you know, I’m a little sweet on her, is all.”

The man under Alex’s care mumbles around her hands and she removes them. He sits up, drool and
blood at the corners of his mouth. “Maybe you should tell her.” He offers. “No time like the present.”

“Lay down, Mads.”

“That would be preposterous.” There are many varied reasons for why she could never. “I doubt I would ever have the courage.”

Lena asks her to be wed the following week. Kara has spent her entire life dogged by the omen of her birth and is beginning to wonder if it’s not a curse at all, or a blessing, but something altogether stranger. Because despite the signs of her impending doom—Alex’s rage, Lena’s ulterior motives, her own ruin—she says yes.

The dormant seed in her heart blossoms in that house. It becomes a terrible flower. At times it’s difficult for Kara to breathe with all the weight in her chest. Lena Luthor is many things: an inhospitable landlord, an incredible mystery, a curious young woman with soot on her hands. Though Kara doubts that she sees these multitudes in herself, to her it’s like the sweetness of an unexpected and well-told twist in a story. Lena thinks herself incapable of kindness. Kara finds herself capable of only that one thing.

Or two things, really. Kindness and an inescapable, ardent attraction. It’s as if every nerve in her body is trained with a Pavlovian response to warm when Lena enters a room. Kara longs to be the thumb Lena runs back and forth across her lower lip when she reads, or the fabric of the shift that peeks above the line of her bust. In her novels, men tear lesser fabrics apart and devour whatever lies beneath. Despite Lena’s open loathing of Kara (or is it Clark? Or the thief?), she can’t stop the fantasies of what she would look like beneath her, laid bare.

“She hates me.” Kara says to Alex and Winn at the tavern, ignoring their skeptical faces. “So nothing will come of it.”

But God, the things that do come of it.

Their shared home is a living organism. Things grow and other things wither away to make room. Lena’s hatred shrinks, Kara’s fantasies sprawl, increasing in size and scope. There’s give and take in every little thing, and with Lena’s minimizing hatred comes her suspicion that all is not as it seems. Kara can see it in the way her looks linger and the way she talks in low whispers with her maid, Ms. Huang. Alex had told her this would happen. Alex Danvers is often right.

She tricks herself into thinking, at that time, that if Lena knew who she really was she might actually come to love her. Kara wants it so badly that it becomes real and makes her bold. Books take on a new significance. Every romantic line reminds her of her wife who isn’t exactly her wife. Every bodice ripped makes her fingers itch to do the same. The more the leeway the more Kara takes advantage, succumbing to her impulses to impress and pursue.

Kara is bested at her own game before the New Year. Sly as she is she hadn’t yet considered the wildcard of touch, and when Lena’s hand falls on her thigh Kara realizes that she has no plan for this situation. She’s waited for 10 years for this very moment only know that she can’t have it. There’s no way for her to be both Lena’s lover and Clark Danvers, the two things she desires most in an otherwise cruel world. She wants Lena to take her upstairs and stain the curve of her breast with her lipstick, to call her by her name—not Clark, but Kara. She wants to submit under the weight of a 10-year crush and be whisked away with the tide of it. That’s what Mr. Wescott would do. He would take Lena Luthor and ravish her down to her essentials, to the minerals under her skin.
But Clark Danvers isn’t Clark Wescott, and she’s never been much of a hero.

Kara dreams of rain on her windowsill and wakes up to the sound of knocking on her door. She’s barely opened her eyes before it begins to crack open. Her first instinct is to panic, grip at the fabric of her night shirt to make sure it’s on her body, then pull the blankets defensively up around her chest.

The person entering her room is, disorientingly enough, her wife. Kara notices that instead of her usual drab colors Lena has chosen a powder blue frock with a lower neckline than she’s used to. Kara begs herself to close her jaw and move her line of sight somewhere else.

“Clark?” Lena is in the doorway, one eyebrow raised. “It’s nearly half past 10. You’re going to miss breakfast.”

“Oh! Uh.” Careful to keep the blankets clutched around her chest, Kara grapples for the wristwatch lying amongst the books and papers on her desk. She checks it, swears. “I’m sorry. Just give me a moment to get dressed and I’ll be straight down.”

Lena doesn’t leave immediately. Kara grows hotter and more unsure the longer her companion haunts the doorway, biting her lip and clutching her hands together in front of her. The whole thing is so unlike her—where is the woman who just a few nights ago pressed her hand onto Kara’s thigh and asked her to come to her bedroom? “I had them make your favorite this morning.” She says. Kara’s jaw drops open again. Lena nods once, as if to affirm her choice, then departs without another word.

When she goes downstairs Lena is sipping from a china cup in front of a plate of Welsh rarebit. She doesn’t smile when Kara enters, but nods pleasantly. It’s all Kara can to do stand next to her chair and gape at the meal in front of her. Then, of course, to the woman moving a piece of rye bread around her plate. So much had changed since that night in the study.

“Did you incur some kind of head damage last night, Mr. Danvers? Sit down.” Just as much stayed the same. Kara’s stomach rumbles and she sits in one motion, digging into the warm plate in front of her. She’s halfway through before realizing that Lena isn’t eating but watching her, eyes bright and reminding Kara of the hawkish way she’d observed her as a girl.

“Is there something on my face?”

“Your glasses.” Lena gestures to her own eyes. “You’re not wearing them this morning.”

“I guess I forgot them.” Kara offers needlessly. Her hand reaches up to touch the corner of her eye out of instinct. Lena still stares, gaze growing more intense.

“I’ve never gotten a good look at your face.” Lena says. “Has anybody ever told you that you have very feminine features for a man of your age?”

Kara’s knees bang against the table and send her meal tumbling into her lap. A servant jerks forward from the corner and begins immediately to fret over the mess of hot cheese, gathering plates and scooping globs of it from the tablecloth. Kara hardly notices. She’s looking beyond the commotion to Lena, nonplussed, taking a sip of her coffee.

“She knows Alex, I’m telling you. She knows.”
Alex rolls her eyes and slams her empty whiskey down on the table, gesturing to the barkeeper for another round. Kara hurries with the dreges of her own beer. “I’m not trying to say that I told you so, but—“

“So don’t say it.” Kara grumbles. “Please. Spare me.”

“You’re going to leave then, right? Move back in with me. It’s about time. Bart can’t tell a mandrel from a swage.”

“Actually, I was thinking...that maybe if she knew—”

“Don’t say it Clark, I swear to God—”

“Maybe she would still like me, maybe even more than before.” Alex groans and puts her head in her hands. “What! Is it really so crazy? There’ve been rumors about her...”

“There are rumors about every dark haired woman without a husband. There are rumors about you, lest we forget. Speaking of, how’s Winn?”

Kara shoots Alex the dirtiest look she can manage and reaches across the table to try and pinch her, nearly knocking their glasses off in the process.

“Winn does not have a crush on me.”

“No.” Alex agrees. “He loves you. How are you the one person on earth not to notice? He’s always touching your muscles for no reason.”

“We’re comparing!” Kara says, loudly enough that people turn their heads to look. “That’s just how men act with each other, Alex. I’m playing the part.”

“A part you learned to play from romance novels. How successful has that been so far with Ms. Luthor?”

“You know what?” Kara slaps her fists on the table and stands up. “I don’t have to hear this from you. I’m going home. To my house. Where I live away from you.”

“Fine, go!” Alex calls over her whiskey. “Give Ms. Luthor a kiss from me.” She mumbles something extra under her breath, but it’s lost to the crowd as Kara leaves.

—-

She observes the back of Lena’s head from the drawing room entrance. Her intricate dark braids, the creamy skin of her neck. A person could almost see the ivory soap she uses in the bath.

“Mr. Danvers, are you going to stand in the doorway like a ghoul or join me?”

Lena is smiling. Kara can tell by her tone and she sees it when she comes around the couch to sit. The folds of her dress are interrupted by a rather large book.

“What are you reading?”

“Poems.”

“You’ve never struck me as the kind of woman who enjoys poetry.”
“Well.” Lena regards Kara from the corner of her eye. “Perhaps some of your sensibility is rubbing off on me.”

Three weeks ago any attempts to encroach on Lena’s personal space would have been harshly rebuffed. Today, Kara knows the boundaries have been extended enough that she can move closer to Lena on the couch, close enough to reach and touch the pages of her book. Lena’s body stiffens and her breath hitches. The hairs on Kara’s arms stand on end. She turns the page.

To her surprise, laying between two pages is a pressed blue flower. A small *oh* escapes her lips when she realizes that it’s one that she’d offered Lena and thought she’d discarded. The world feels all at once smaller, condensed to the room where they sit, then to the couch they occupy. Kara reaches out to feel the shape of the flower and shudders when Lena covers her hand with her own.

“Blue is my favorite color. Did you know when you gave it to me?”

“No. You’ll have to be careful, I might begin to think you’re sentimental.”

Laughter bubbles up from her throat. “You won’t want to look at the rest of the book, then.”

It’s all so surreal that Kara has to wonder if it’s a part of an elaborate daydream. She thinks she should pinch herself to be sure, but she doesn’t want to be jarred from the moment. Not when Lena is across from her looking at her mouth with two blown pupils.

“What’s happening?” She asks instead. It’s meant to be halfway a joke. Lena doesn’t laugh.

“I want to ask you again to join me in my rooms tonight. Would you tell me no a second time?”

“I wouldn’t.” Kara sighs. “I don’t have the power. Please don’t ask it of me.”

As if her words were the permission Lena needed, she sags into Kara’s side and cups the back of her head with her free hand. They don’t kiss, but there’s an acknowledgement of a kiss in the air around them. Their foreheads press together and their legs mold, even through the multitudes of Lena’s skirt.

“You’ve ruined my life.” Lena offers with no bite. Her voice is barely above a whisper. "You’re a horrible, treacherous thing.”

“I’m sorry.” Kara says sincerely. She knows things will only get harder. It makes her affection grow large.

It takes Ms. Huang announcing her entrance with a soft clearing of her throat to break them apart. Eyes downcast, Lena closes the tome on her lap with a *thud* and places it on the adjacent arm of the couch.

“I’m sorry to bother you Ma’am, it’s just that Mr. Tapper from Hudson Bay is here to see Mr. Danvers. It seemed urgent.”

Kara rises, straightening her vest and hoping the blush on her neck isn’t too prominent. “Of course. I’ll see him in the dining room.”

“That’s quite alright, Ms. Huang. Could you prepare my rooms for me?” She glances at Kara. “I’m suddenly feeling like a nap.”

Kara steels herself for every possible outcome, from Lena slapping her face on sight to Lena waiting naked and sprawled on her bed like some of her more elaborate fantasies. Very little is accomplished
with Mr. Tapper other than drinking spirits and using vague terms to talk shop. The one thing that Kara does not do is make a choice to come clean one way or another, not until she’s standing in front of Lena’s door with a trembling hand poised to knock. Arriving with no plan, no speech, and no idea of how to navigate is ill-advised, and she’s sure Alex is sitting somewhere with the hairs on her neck standing on end.

Still, she knocks. How could she not?

“Come in.” Kara takes a breath and grabs the brass handle, pushing in the door and craning her head in. As soon as she sees what’s laying in wait for her, she blows out the held air and turns around to leave the room. “Clark, come back. Don’t be silly.”

This whole thing is ludicrous. Kara should just keep walking, down the stairs and out the front door and all the way back to her cot at the shop. Then again--she turns and steps into the bedroom, drinking in Lena’s appearance, her bustier, the cleft of the robe that barely covers the top of her thighs--then again, maybe she’ll stay.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter became a behemoth so I split it into two.
As a rich woman, Lena Luthor has known her fair share of indulgences—fine pastries, silk dresses, houses of many rooms—but the look on Clark’s face when she enters is a pleasure that surpasses any other she’s ever known. There’s something thrilling about a calculated plan well-executed, especially one with such an appealing risk and reward ratio and hardy economics. For one tailored bustier and a robe, she sees her husband (her wife? A thrill runs down Lena’s spine at the thought) like that.

The thing of it is: Clark Danvers makes Lena feel like green moss is growing around her heart, a river rushing between her legs, wet and alive. She wants Clark’s naked body, wants to parse it apart like a child would peel an orange. And then, having altered Lena emotionally, having placed terrible greenery about her rib cage, Clark should distract her from it physically. Instead of having these treacherous, soft feelings, Lena imagines herself stretching around her wife’s hand. Concealing bruises left by her mouth and teeth, being caged under her body and made sore. The click of the door closing behind Clark is the sealing of the envelope of her fantasy.

That time will come. For now she remains at the entrance with her hands crammed in her pockets looking like she’s had too much wine and been spun around. Her disorientation is perfect. Lena is the wolf from Little Red Riding Hood, perched and lying in wait. What big eyes you have, my dear.

“Come closer, Clark.” Lena gestures to a chair positioned catty corner with a pointed toe. Above all other things, she wants to know Clark’s real name. She wants to feel it in her mouth, on her tongue. Would it be something proper and feminine, like Elizabeth? She’s certain it’s nothing plain, Clark is no Ann or Mary, but something exotic perhaps. Cecile, Philomena. “Sit there. Let’s talk.”

“Talk?” She's stalling, staying a safe distance from where Lena sits.

“Unless there’s something else you’d rather be doing.” As part of her first act, Lena shifts and uncrosses her legs, in the process gaping her robe open and leaving her knees slightly parted. What a delight it is to see her action reflected in Clark’s face like a refractory glass. What a delight it will be when everything is laid bare and her view is less obstructed.

“No.” Clark says in a wonderful stutter, then: “Okay.” In one quick, jerky movement she’s sat in the chair. Her back is ramrod straight and her hands are folded in her lap, polite. It’s such a frail facade that Lena can’t wait to take a sledgehammer to. “What would you like to talk about?”

“Your meeting.” Lena says, struggling to keep a straight face. She takes a moment to inspect the lacquer on her nails. “With Mr. Tapper.”

Clark looks down for a moment before nodding her head as if she’d known all along. She adjusts her already perfectly straight glasses. The absurdity of it, and Clark’s easy belief of her reasoning, makes Lena want to giggle. As if she would have invited her up to her bedroom, wearing this, to talk shop. “Of course! Yes, of course.”

As Clark launches into whatever chauvinist nonsense went on that afternoon, Lena leans slanted onto the arm of her chair, the beginning of act two. Her knees open wider, reveal more. One hand rests open on the bare skin of her leg. Like a trained dog, Clark’s eyes fall to the invitation of her thighs and then dart immediately back up—there’s no pause in her speech and the only indication that she’s seen anything at all is the redness of her cheeks.
So she opens them more. Only a sliver, but it’s enough. Clark is dragged back to that focal point between her legs, the look corporeal enough that it’s a hand coming to rest squarely on her. Her hips itch to lift into it.

“Clark?” Lena prompts, legs gaping. “You were saying about the cost benefit analysis of fox furs?”

“I—” Clark works her jaw and squirms in her chair. “I’m sorry, it’s just that you’re naked. It’s making it hard to concentrate.”

“I would say I’m somewhat clothed, if you want to be technical.”

“I’d rather not.” Clark crosses her legs. “It makes no difference.”

“Do you like it?”

“What do you mean?”

“My being naked.” Clark looks away sharply and clears her throat. She digs the heel of one boot against the wood floor as if trying to tap a restart button. One plump, pink lip disappears into her mouth and pops out again glistening wet. Lena figures that it’s a simple question that shouldn’t require this much thought to answer, and the last thing she wants is for Clark to have the time to avoid it. “Do you like it?” She asks again, firmer this time.

“Yes, yes. I like it.” Clark admits quietly, still not quite meeting Lena’s eye. The dark of the room works in her advantage, obscuring her face and her body, and she leans into it. But Lena knows Clark can’t hide from her for long. She won’t allow it.

“I could take off more, if you wanted.” Lena offers casually. This captures Clark’s interest, or her surprise, and her eyes move back up to look at her. “I know you think about what it would be like. My clothes off. Your hands on me. I just need you to answer a question.”

“What’s that?”

“What’s your name?”

Taken off guard, Clark sits up a little straighter. “Clark Danvers?” She says. When Lena remains unimpressed, she continues. “Clark Jeremiah Danvers? My mother calls me chicken.”

Realizing that her tactic is being stonewalled Lena shifts gears. “Take off your shoes.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your boots, Clark. Don’t you know it’s rude to enter a lady’s room and track in mud?”

Eyebrows knitted, Clark bends over and begins to fumble with her laces. The only noise in the room is cotton sliding against leather and the muted pop of her freeing her feet and setting them aside. Once finished she begins to relax back into the chair, which won’t do.

“Stand up.”

“Lena…”

“Stand up, I want to get a look at you.”

Clark does, and she does it so obediently that Lena’s mouth waters with expectation. There’s so much less resistance than she’d anticipated. It’s almost as if Clark wants her to come to the truth. The
thought crosses Lena’s mind that perhaps she’s more in on the game than Lena had given her credit for. It’s ludicrous, of course. Clark is beautiful, but she’s a bit simple.

“The vest can go, too.” Clark shrugs it off without complaint. Lena licks her lips. “And your shirt.”

The other woman gives her a look is all at once fierce and guarded, and in a telling move she crosses her arms over her chest. “I don’t think that would be prudent.”

“I’ve never seen a men’s undershirt before. I’d like to see what it looks like.”

“I find that implausible.”

“Are you challenging me, Clark?”

Clark inhales deeply and looks at the ceiling as if seeking counsel from a higher power. Then she relaxes her arms and begins to work at the buttons of her shirt. Lena knows in that moment that she’s won, achieved her checkmate. It sends delicious ripples throughout her body to sense the inevitable outcome of this encounter, to wonder if Clark senses it too.

The shirt falls to the floor with a muted sound, leaving Clark in her long undershirt, britches, and socks. Lena can’t help but search the gauzy fabric for any sign of the feminine body she knows lies underneath. It gives nothing away, to her disappointment.

“Is my lady satisfied?”

Lena hums. “The undershirt as well.”

“Surely you can’t be serious.”

“Quite. Take it off.” She moves forward to the edge of her seat, fully exposing the black fabric of her bustier and her naked lap. Clark gapes at her and traces her eyes over Lena’s chest, spilling over the top of her garment.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Instead of answering, Lena beckons Clark to come closer. When she does, she takes her undershirt in her hand and begins to untuck it herself, trying not to submit to the gaze she can feel burning at the top of her head. When she’s finished she looks up, meeting that look head on.

“There. I’ve started it for you, so finish.”

“Earlier you called me treacherous. You said I’d ruined your life. You don’t know the half of it.”

“You always had a flair for the dramatic.”

“Something tells me you like it.” Clark says, and lifts the hem of her shirt. It’s everything and nothing like Lena imagined. Being face-first in her abs is a nice addition, and gives her an excuse to take her time dragging her eyes up to the real focal point of the journey.

And there it is, in all it’s sweet relief. Bindings that look like they were cut from a flour sack concealing, but not entirely, the curve of Clark’s breast. Lena’s plans unravel and the cacophony in her head quiets. She tilts her forehead to rest on Clark’s firm stomach, then presses a kiss there, sighing at the tremble she feels against her mouth.

“What’s your name?” She asks again, eyes closed. Ann, Philomena, Mary, Elizabeth?
“My name is Kara.”

Lena’s fingers are at work discarding Kara’s britches before she’s finished with the last syllable. It echoes in her head—Kara, Kara, Kara. She pushes the pants and socks down to her ankles and Kara steps out of them, whittling her to only a pair of white linen underthings.

There’s a buzz of pure excitement locked in Lena’s gut at the prospect of laying with her, being fucked by her, enough that she forgets to be slow. One hand reaches past the hem of Kara’s underwear and the other stabilizes her when she bucks forward at the contact.

She grasps onto, then produces, a bundle of socks balled up. They’re warm in her palm from Kara’s body heat. “Confident?”

Kara blushing. “It was all I had.”

Lena shakes her head. It’s inconsequential. The only thing of consequence is Kara’s skin and her wondrous body. She places another worshipful kiss where her underwear and hips meet, then another, each increasingly hungry. There’s no stopping her hands from starting to pull at the waistband of Kara’s underthings until those too give away to her appetite and slide down to her knees. Lena is consumed by the feeling of it, Kara’s hands tangling at her nape, the coarse hair between thighs tickling her bottom lip, and most of all Kara’s consummate tremble.

“Lena, wait.” A little miffed to be distracted from her work, Lena looks up, lower lip catching on the skin of Kara’s stomach. There’s red smears all over her lower body from the paint on Lena’s mouth, and she’s sure her own face must look a fright. It’s the messy work of it, she supposes. Kara is pulling at her biceps, bringing her to stand so they’re equal, or as close as they can be. Her lover’s face is nearly feral, you couldn’t see the color of her irises even if there was light in the room. Between them are still the flower-sack bindings. Hateful things. Lena reaches to find the seam and tear them away, only to be stopped by Kara’s hand. “Please, wait a moment. Look at me, look at me—”

Lena does, surprised by the frankness of her grip on her wrist, and then taken away by her look. Blonde curls askew, glasses low on her nose, mouth open. This isn’t Clark, this is Kara. Her husband, her wife. Lena wants to know her from the inside out, from her toes to the top of her sweet-smelling head. She tugs again at the fabric separating her from Kara’s breasts, desperate. “Take it off. I can’t stand this for another minute.”

“Are you meaning to tell me that even after--you’d still want to, with me?”

“I’d never have considered it before now.” Lena breathes, and Kara’s hand falls away in astonishment. Newly freed, her fingers make quick work of the cinching of her binding and she unravels them with uncharacteristic attentiveness, wanting to savor the gift she knows is underneath. The bandages slacken, then fall away, revealing her breasts. They’re small, with nipples a pale pink and hard even in the trapped warmth of Lena’s room. “God in heaven you’re lovely. Handsome.” She buries her face into Kara’s neck and inhales, wraps her arms around her middle and pulls that pliant body against her own.

“You really think so?” Instead of responding, Lena nuzzles her way from Kara’s neck, to the skin under her ear, to the corner of her mouth, and kisses her. She’s never kissed anyone before, but finds herself confident that she could be good at it. They break apart chastely after only a moment. The kiss has left Kara’s eyes big like moons and just as glassy. “Even with my hair like it is? Short, like a boy’s? And, and, my--well, they’re small, for a girl--” Lena cuts her off with another press of her mouth, deeper this time, running her tongue along the seam of her. Kara gives in instantly, parting her lips and letting her lick her way inside. Arms wrap around Lena’s slight frame, pushing her robe
off her shoulders and letting it fall to the ground.

Lena strokes Kara’s tongue with her own, cups her face in one of her hands and reaches between them to feel the form of her breast with the other. A subsequent moan is trapped between their mouths, increasing in pitch when Lena captures a nipple between her fingers and rolls it. There’s a wet sound when they break apart and Kara’s heavy breathing filling the room. “Everything you have is just perfect for you. Exquisite.”

“Y-you too.” Lena smiles at the ineptness of it and puts one foot forward, walking them backwards. Kara shuffles a little, kicking her last layer down and away before allowing Lena to guide them toward the luxury of her bed. Fingers move to the stays on the back of the bustier, plucking at them fruitlessly. “How do I get this off?” She pulls once, mightily, and it breaks apart, buttons popping against the wall and floor. “Nevermind.”

“Strong.” Lena chokes out, hands on Kara’s biceps, thumbs tracing over the whip-like scars there. She’s never been so excited to have a piece of expensive clothing totally ruined. One more tug and the bustier is gone, clattering to the floor, and Lena’s most scandalous pair of panties (it’s scandalous that she has them at all, really. Lillian would be appalled) follow suit.

Nakedness is uncanny to her. As a lady of certain means she very rarely spent more than a 15 minutes a day unclothed or unsubmerged inside a tub of water. The idea of being nude with another human being is even queerer. As a young woman her mother told her that she would wake up one morning and understand what it meant to desire a husband. The only thing that Lena ever learned to desire were the bodies of her day school classmates and, later on, her governess. She’d indulged endlessly in fantasies. Rich ones. Ones of her governess reaching under her skirts during a piano lesson and bringing her to the screaming edge. Ones of two of her classmates helping her in the bath, kissing along her shoulders and chest, licking at her nipples.

But this wasn’t a fantasy, was it? Kara is real and their bodies are real and naked against each other. Lena can feel the suppleness of her skin, her taut nipples, her blunt nails scraping along her shoulder blades. Twenty five years of need are breaking open inside of her at Kara’s look of naked adoration, her hands reaching between them to skim over the curve of her breast. It’s all at once too much and too gentle for Lena to cope with but she lets Kara drag her onto the bed and over her body all the same.

Their mouths connect again, open. This being Lena’s third kiss of her life, she finds herself more poised than the ones previous. Their tongues slip against each other and bodies move in tandem with the motion. Lena’s hips between Kara’s thighs have a mind of their own and buck in a sloppy rhythm. She thinks this is how men and women make love, or so she’d been told, but it’s so much better this way. Kara quakes underneath her and goosebumps pop up on her skin, goosebumps that Lena had caused with her hands and mouth. Every flick of her tongue has a responding jerk of Kara’s hips, or pass of her hand over Lena’s back.

“Lena.” Kara breaks apart and grapples to make some distance between them, much to Lena’s distaste. She dips back in for more, more of her mouth, more of her touch. “Can we take a moment?”

“For what?” Lena murmurs, catching Kara’s earlobe between her lips. The other woman seems to lose her train of thought. Perfectly according to plan.

“To slow down.” Even as she says it, Kara’s gaze falls to Lena’s front, to her bare breasts, and lingers there. “You’ve only just met me.”

“I’ve known you for months.” To demonstrate, Lena takes Kara’s hand and cups it over her right breast. It’s a good move, and she can swear she sees Kara’s eyes briefly roll before she squeezes it,
causing a ripple to move throughout Lena’s body and land between her legs. The evidence of Kara’s own arousal is smeared on her lower stomach.

“You’ve known Clark.” She manages as she continues to fondle over Lena’s chest. Lena buries her face again in Kara’s shoulder, opening her mouth to suck, and grabs her behind her knees to pull them around her hips. The resulting position leaves Kara open to her, closer than ever to her center, and yet she still speaks. “But not me—as Kara.”

“Is there a difference?”

“Yes. I’ve loved you since I was 16, and you barely know my name.”

This stops Lena cold in her tracks. She remembers now why she hated Clark, and why she still might hate Kara. The moss rubs against her rib cage, pads the pounding of her heart.

“Why do you insist on saying such horrible things to me?” In the cradle of Kara’s body she relaxes, defeated. The other woman has the audacity to laugh.

“Because they’re true.” It’s not until she feels her rocking, shushing, stroking her hair, that she realizes that Kara must feel the heat of her tears at the crook of her neck.

—and-

Stories are a funny thing. Everybody must have one, even the scullery maids, even the tailor shop owners, even her mother. Lena has never cared to know one before Kara, and thinks that none would be as compelling as her journey from a creek-bathed baby to the woman in her arms.

“Don’t you think it’s a little extreme?” Lena drags her fingers along the sharp relief of Kara’s collarbone. “To have lived as a man for so long.”

“I don’t know that I’ve been living as a man, not all the way. If that makes sense.” Kara shrugs. “I’ve been living the life I would want to lead as a woman, if I could. The only lie I’ve told is my name.” She brings her eyes up to meet Lena’s. “Everything else is the truth of me. I swear it.”

She likes this story the best. The one where Kara beats the odds to live her life. There’s something special in those words, like a fairy tale. Instead of witches or orphans or tricky wolves, there’s a blonde haired girl telling her sister to rid her of her hair in the kitchen.

—and-

“Your letters, Ms. Luthor.” Lena would not look up from the paper if it weren’t for the gust of cold air that accompanies Jess as she enters the room. Nearing the middle of December it’s cold enough that she spends most of her time in her chambers, and Kara in hers or entertaining partners in the drawing room. She has a thick shawl over her shoulders and a half eaten breakfast sitting on the tray in front of her. “A word of warning: there’s one from Mrs. Luthor.”

Lena sets the paper down and gives Jess a tired look. “Are you quite sure?” Her mother hasn’t written her in nearly a year. Jess bows her head in confirmation. Lena picks up the stack of letters and finds the one with Mrs. Lillian Luthor in her mother's careful hand on top. “Stay in here while I read this, would you?” She says as she rips into the envelope, producing three or four thick pages. Hardly worth the postage. But the name scrawled on it gives her a thought. “Jess, before I forget.”

“Yes, Ms. Luthor?”

“I think it’s time that you began to refer to me as Mrs. Danvers, don’t you?” She stares down at the
letters on the page, not yet processing them, as she speaks, “And the rest of the servants. It is, after all, my legal name.”

“Yes, Mrs. Danvers.” Lena’s lips tick up at the sound of it, even with the uncertainty with which it leaves Jess’s mouth. It brings to her mind thoughts of Kara and puts her in the right kind of headspace to begin reading the letter. Opening correspondence from her mother with anything but a positive disposition would be unwise.

It is a testament to Lillian Luthor’s skill at her trade that Lena has a headache before she’s done with the first page. The subsequent two and a half grow only worse, and by the time she’s placed the last face-down on her table she has a pounding migraine. “Shall I fetch you a glass of water, Ma’am?” Jess inquires. Lena waves her off with a flick of her hand and begins folding the pages together and assembling them back into the envelope, then tossing the whole package in the hearth where it belongs.

“Summon Mr. Danvers for me. And while you’re at it, tell the servants to prepare the guest room in the far East Wing. Mrs. Luthor intends to stay for the New Year.”

The walls are thin and Lena can hear Kara whistling her way to her rooms from a yard out. To her distaste, the sound lessens the pain behind her eyes. Kara knocks respectfully at the door and enters with a little bow. Unnecessary, but fetching. “You called for me, my love?” The ache diminishes by another degree. Lena curses herself.

She could say that she’d wanted Kara’s presence only to talk over the upcoming logistical nightmare of the New Year. Winn Schott would be joining them for near a fortnight, Alexandra would be there for longer. And now Lillian, too, for an undetermined period of time. They had rooms to ready, china to select, meals to plan. Over the course of these months Kara had picked up some of the finer details of her new station, but remained overall rather green. She wouldn’t know how to properly select bed linens if they slapped her in the face.

But Kara’s mere presence in her room has made the thought of these things more bearable. That is the pit to be prised from this. It is both Lena’s balm and her eternal fluster. She’d hoped—longed, really—that Kara’s revealed secret would transmute their relationship into something more manageable. Lena’s sexual agitation had been perhaps mistaken as soft feelings, warped by her confusion as to Clark’s sex. And that sex would perhaps be the cure for her sickness.

But there had been none of that. No sex. No transmutation. Only soft lines in Kara’s face that she can’t unsee, a new name to learn, and a wife who has only redoubled her efforts to win her affection. In Kara’s eyes and in her world, all poems are written about Lena. All flowers bloom for her. Songs written for the pianoforte are naught in comparison to her voice. God had only her eyes in mind when he made emeralds, or green silk dresses, or the gleam of the ocean.

It’s hateful, what she’s asking of her. All the people that Lena has ever loved are dead or left her and she has no room left in herself for another disappointment. So she takes Kara into her bed every night, naked again as the first time they’d lain together, and hopes that she’ll give in and break her curse. The only thing that has come of it are ardent kisses and whisperings that get lost somewhere in the embers of the hearth. She thinks that she may not be trying hard enough. It would be so much easier if Kara could just be cruel to her.

“What’s on your mind, darling?” Kara is sitting across from her, pouring herself a cup of coffee from the carafe on Lena’s breakfast tray. She looks so casual in Lena’s rooms now, as much a part of the minutiae as one of her chairs or tables. “Ms. Huang was in a state when she said you needed to see me.”
“My mother would like to stay with us for the New Year,” Lena grouses, watching Kara steal a bite of scone off her plate. “Lord, can you imagine what horrible luck she’ll bring to this household?”

“Don’t be like that.” Kara claps crumbs of scone from her hands and wipes them from her trousers. “We’ll have a grand time, don’t you think? And whatever bad luck Mrs. Luthor brings with her, I’m sure we can counteract it through devices of our own. What if I read the rest of these letters to you while you warmed your feet on the fire, hm?”

It does feel better, hearing Kara’s voice doing impressions of Mr. Person during his droll legal correspondence. Her stocking feet she extends toward the heat of the fire, wiggling her toes every now and again to keep her circulation moving. Outside snow is falling and covering the windowpane that frames Kara’s face, her tawny curls. When she catches her shivering, Lena beckons her over and they pull their chairs close, each stretched out to capture some warmth, and once the letters are done they talk about other things. If Lena were the type of woman to be able to put things out of her mind, this would be the perfect moment for it. But she isn’t, and it’s not.

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“Why don’t you just do it?” Lena pants, arching up and pressing her breast firmer into Kara’s hand. Kara squirms on top of her, body bare and legs tangling underneath the blankets like rope-knots. There’s no response, there hasn’t ever been one, just Lena asking questions into the chilly air. She grabs Kara’s hand, the one that rests fondly over her chest, and drags it up to her mouth.

If she won’t answer Lena’s questions verbally, there’s always the tell of her body. When her fingers drag over Lena’s lips, Kara’s breathing breaks into a pant. Her eyes widen when Lena opens her mouth and separates two to lave with her tongue, then wrap her lips around and suck.

It’s like she can always work her up to a certain point. Kara will go to the limit of heavy breathing, sucking, moaning, and grinding but go not a shade further. Not to the outer reaches of where Lena needs her. Kara’s fingers leave her mouth with a pop. “Is it because I’m awful to you?”

“What?” Kara blinks, dazed. Lena takes her slick hand and puts it against her cheek.

“Don’t you ever feel like getting back at me, for being so cruel?” There’s spit drying on Lena’s cheek. “I would let you.”

“I—you’re not—you’re not cruel. Not since you found out, and not really before then either.” Lena’s heart clenches in her chest when Kara smiles. She hates her. “A little cold, maybe, but.” Then she leans to place the tenderest of kisses on Lena’s mouth. Instead of a slap, instead of spit, or pulling her hair. A kiss. Lena trembles. She wishes Kara had struck her instead.

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Lena wakes up alone in her bed on the day of Lillian’s arrival. It’s an omen if there ever was one. She’s left to break the ice in her washing bowl on her own, shivering in her nightgown, while the sounds of servants shouting and thudding along the hallways echo from outside. The sight that greets her when she’s dressed and downstairs is that of Kara in her Sunday best, directing maids with armfuls of linens with a sense of organized chaos. Her face brightens when Lena descends the staircase.

“What’s all this?”

“Last minute preparations for your mother.” Kara chirps. “I noticed that we’d selected green linens for her room, but I remember you said that she’s quite fond of purple.”
“It’s a royal color.” Lena says faintly. Kara beams.

“So I’ve had them changed, and picked the china for tonight’s dinner.”

“Oh, please tell me--”

“It’s the ones with the swallow pattern. Jess is already unwrapping them from storage.”

Lena’s eyes widen in disbelief. Kara’s choices are perfect, even better than the ones she herself had made in her stress-addled state. “Will you be joining me for breakfast?”

“No time! Winn and Alex will be here by noon. There’s still so much to get done. But,” She pauses to deliver a chaste kiss to Lena’s cheek. “Enjoy. And for God’s sakes, relax. I’ve got a handle on it.”

Kara does. She works like a well oiled machine until luncheon, when Winn and Alex come in the same carriage. By the time they step in the door, there’s not a flower or a curtain out of place, and the servants are waiting in a line around the entrance as if they’d been dallying all the day. They ‘oh’ and ‘ah’ appropriately, despite having seen the house before, and Kara is overly keen to show them around to the rooms full of her personal touches. Lena is proud, too.

The tone for the afternoon is set when, before settling in the parlor for a game of gin rummy, Kara inquires after Lena’s well-being and touches at the crook of her elbow with her hand. “How are you feeling, my love?” Winn and Alex’s eyes dart over and furrow in tandem, as if they’d practiced it beforehand. Kara drops her touch from Lena’s elbow and chuckles nervously, bypassing the moment by asking to pour the group a drink.

Alex beats them in cards every round. It’s a mix of her skill and the distraction of her opponents. Winn seems dead-set on monopolizing Kara’s attention, sometimes with words, sometimes with soft touches that do not go unnoticed by Lena. When he’s not sweet talking her wife, he is looking at Lena like she has a series of colorful insults about his mother tacked on her forehead.

Alex, for her part, squints at Kara with a sense of misgiving. These looks are amplified whenever Kara shows Lena any touch of husbandly affection—adjusting an errant curl of her hair, or refreshing her drink before she’s thought to ask for it. At one point she thinks Winn’s head might really explode off of his body watching Kara squeeze her shoulder when she lays down a good hand.

The tension grows so swiftly that Lena recommends they retire from cards to the drawing room for music. Winn elbows his way to the pianoforte and proceeds to play a long (albeit lovely, unfortunately) love song with his eyes locked on Kara all the while. To Lena’s great distress, she looks pleased, even nodding her head along as his fingers work over the keys. Alex hasn’t detached her lips from the rim of her whiskey glass all the while.

“Mrs. Danvers. Mr. Danvers. Mr. Schott. Ms. Danvers.” Jess curtsies to each of them when she enters, looking breathless. She doesn’t seem to notice the tension. “Mrs. Luthor has arrived and is waiting in the Grand Hall.”

“Lord.” Lena sighs, straightening her skirts and rising from the couch. “Tell me her things have been taken to the East Wing room.”

There’s a flurry of activity. Kara and Lena tell Winn and Alex to prepare for dinner and meet them in the dining room by half seven. Despite the bluster of earlier, Kara looks shy as they make their way to the grand hall. “What if your mother doesn’t like me?”

“I’m sure she won’t. It’s a testament to your character.”
Lillian Luthor has looked the same since she plucked Lena from an Irish orphanage all those years ago. Lena supposes that demons don’t age. This is to Lena’s benefit, however, as over the course of her life she has seen her mother so few times that if she looked any different she likely would not recognize her. She waits in the Great Hall, surrounded by panicked looking servants, paying Lena no mind as she enters. The first person she notices, in fact, is Kara.

In retrospect, this is the beginning of the whole downhill trajectory of the evening. Had things been different—perhaps if Lena put off their meeting until dinner, or had the foresight to try and make Kara as Clark look less charming—something may have been salvaged of it. But things aren’t different. In this moment, Lillian sees Kara. Or, really, she sees Clark, and her eyes narrow with pleasure. She smiles and Lena can pinpoint the exact moment that Kara is trapped in her web. In retrospect, she should have prepared her better.

“Lena, so nice of you to finally greet your old mother.” Lillian says, not looking at Lena at all. “Or should I say Mrs. Danvers?”

“Good evening, mother. I’m glad to see you traveled safely.”

“Yes, uh. Good evening, Mrs. Luthor. I’m glad to meet you finally.” Kara stutters. Is she blushing? Now Lena is narrowing her eyes.

“Indeed, Mr. Danvers. I see my daughter neglected to mention how handsome you are. Or to mention you at all.” Lillian removes her gloves and hands them to Lena, still without so much as glancing her way. Lena is frustrated to see that Kara hasn’t looked at her either. Lillian extends her hand. “Don’t be shy. Didn’t your mother ever teach you manners?”

Kara stoops to kiss Lillian’s hand and Lena sees red.

Lena can, and has, endure any number of indignities. The death of her parents. The upbringing of an upper class woman. Marriage. And even at the hands of Kara Danvers, being made out of control of her own life and feelings. But this? The burden of jealousy? It will not stand. She should’ve known that this is how things would play out, and to think how close she’d been to you-know-what.

Lena huffs into her room and pulls the pins out of her hair impatiently. “Jess!” She hollers. “Ms. Huang!”

“Yes, Mrs. Danvers.” Jess comes in through the door, eyes wide. Lena nearly says don’t call me that, but stops herself. There are other needs to attend to that aren’t her basest and most petty ones.

“Prepare me an outfit for dinner tonight. And make it a good one. Actually, just lay out my slip. I’ll eat dinner in that.”

“I believe that would be inadvisable, Mrs. Danvers.”

“Fine, then the blue dress, with the—“ Lena gestures around her breasts and Jess understands, scurrying to her wardrobe and pulling out the appropriate drawer. She dresses her in near complete silence as Lena glares at her reflection in the mirror.

“Any special occasion, Ma’am, for the dress?”

“I’m trying to impress my husband.” Lena says, wincing when Jess pulls the stays particularly tight.

Once finished, she sends Jess to the dining room to oversee dinner preparations and, most of all, to
give herself a moment to breathe. The dress and complicated updo of her hair put a fine mask over her vexation. She exits her bedroom into the parlor, surprised to see Winn sitting at the games table.

“Mrs. Danvers.” He greets. He’s not looking at her, rather focused on a tumbler of brown alcohol that sits next to his arm. “Fine evening, isn’t it?”

“Mr. Schott. I thought you and Ms. Danvers would be in your rooms until half seven.”

“I was hoping to run into you before supper.” Lena is no great reader of minds but she can sense that his energy is off. There’s something quietly disheveled about his appearance, although he’s in a fine outfit. “I wanted to talk to you about Clark.”

“My husband?” She prompts, notices how Winn’s fist clenches and releases. “Has he said something?”

“Your husband.” He laughs when he says it and it hits the wrong chord in Lena. “Has he told you he loves you?”

“Yes.” Lena responds. “Every day.”

“He can’t, you know. He’s a queer. A dandy.”

She’s not sure if it’s the brandy she’d had in her room, the stress of seeing her mother flirt with the object of her affection, or the audacity of Winslow Schott sitting in front of her and telling her that her wife is a man who lays with other men. It could be all three. With a placid expression she’d perfected in day school, she picks up his glass from the games table and drops it to the ground. It shatters at Winn’s feet. She doesn’t register his expression, whatever it is. “Do you think he loves you, then, Mr. Schott? Last night he fell asleep drooling on my bosom like a baby.” Winn exhales and his first clenches again. Lena’s voice drops to a hiss. “I don’t know what’s wrong with you and I don’t care. All I know is that tonight we are going to get together and have a pleasant dinner, am I understood?”

Alex chooses that moment to enter the parlor, looking as startled to see Winn there as Lena had been. “Winn, could you give me and...Mrs. Danvers a moment, please?”

“Happily.” He stands all in a huff and retreats to the dining room, feet stomping. “I’m finished here anyway.”

“Is everything quite alright Ms. Danvers? I really should be getting downstairs and making sure—oh!” Lena squeaks as Alex grabs her by her shoulder, moving to sit them together at the parlor table, dresses blended together. She leans forward, face serious.

“Has my brother been untoward with you?”

“Untoward—he’s my husband, Ms. Danvers! Is there really any such thing?”

“Listen to me, he’s well intentioned, but stupid. And blinded very easily from his morals by pretty women. If he’s touched you, tried to trick you into anything—”

“Ms. Danvers, I have to confess something to you—“

Footsteps come thudding up to the door. Lena knows they belong to Jess. “Mrs. Luthor, I’m sorry to disturb you, but your mother is downstairs harassing the servants...”

“Oh, thank God.” Lena murmurs under her breath, rising from Alex’s grasp. Alex looks right on the
verge of arguing with her, but she moves on too quickly to allow her the chance. “I believe that’s our cue to join the others for dinner.”

The seating arrangements are also cursed, as it turns out. To Kara’s credit, there’s no way she could have foreseen this outcome when she was making them. They’re in the smaller dining room with the doors shuttered tight but for the servants coming in and out of the warming area. Kara is flanked on either side of the round table by Lillian and Lena, a blush affixed to her face and eyes downcast. Lillian seemed to have also chosen that evening to wear her most revealing dress. Across from them sits Winn, popping potatoes into his mouth and glaring at Lena. Alex sits to his side and does the same, Kara the object of her ire.

“Well!” Lillian says pleasantly, apropos of nothing. “I will say, the last thing I expected to hear from Mrs. Lord is that my Lena had married. She was always such a sullen girl, not really fit for love. But here we are! And to somebody so dashing. Although blonde.” Lillian reaches and sweeps at one of Kara’s errant curls with a finger. It bounces and springs back into place on her forehead. Kara blushes. Lena’s grip on her fork turns deadly. “We all have our faults. Tell me, Mr. Danvers. What was your trade before marrying my daughter?” She looks pointedly at Kara’s biceps, then reaches out to rub her hand over them. Kara chokes on a piece of steak.

“B-blacksmith, Ma’am.”

This is ending tonight. One way or another, Lena is putting a stop to it. She toes off her flat and tosses it to the side. Then, slowly but with assuredness, she reaches her stockinged foot to wrap around Kara’s ankle. Never the master of subtlety, and faced with the dual assault of Lillian’s hand on her bicep and Lena’s toes crawling into her lap, she jumps. In the background, Lena faintly hears Alex telling Winn to keep his feet to himself.

By the end of dinner, everybody looks tired. Winn may be on the verge of tears, Alex has drunken herself into a half-stupor, and Kara’s best pants are stained in the groin from wine (wine that Lena had spilled, on purpose, to she would have an excuse to lean over and clean it up). The only person looking pleased with themselves is Lillian, who dabs at her mouth with a pristine white cloth napkin before dropping it daintily to the table. “Bellisimo. Not quite as good as my cooks in France, but it was a fine try. Now what do you ladies say we retire to the parlor and leave the boys to talk politics?” Lena looks askance at Kara, who glances up at her with heavy eyes. She looks south of happy.

The parlor and the drawing room are Jack-and-Jill style, one leading into the other and separated by a wall and a door. Winn and Kara’s serious, muted voices can be heard over the sipping of coffee and clinking of China in the drawing room. “I am not a queer and I will not have you insinuate it to my wife!” Kara yells, voice clear as a bell.

“Politics must be interesting this year.” Lillian remarks, and sips her tea.

It takes several hours and 5 fake yawns for Lena to extract herself back to her chambers. She can’t say exactly what will happen—nobody can see the future, after all—but she has a fine idea of what might come to pass. With that in mind, she asks Jess to lay out a slip and a pair of stockings before dismissing her for the evening.
Kara comes stomping in, just as she’d hoped, all apple-cheeked bluster, and slams the door behind herself. Lena has been waiting—very patiently—and rises at the sound of wood against wood. The force of it trembles the room and trembles Lena.

There are no words passing between them when Kara tumbles up and into her space, hand darting out and grabbing Lena’s wrist. Her grip is hot and so tight that Lena knows she couldn’t break free of it with her best effort. She wants that grip everywhere on her body, wants to feel it sing to her, but there’s something even more satisfying in the way Kara loosens it in the end. There’s an implicit dare in it. Lena could free herself, if she wants to, but she doesn’t.

“What do you think you’re doing?” If anything were going to break the myth of Kara’s power it might be her trembling, liquid voice. But it only magnifies the experience, reminding Lena how easy she’ll be to unravel, finally, when the time comes. “Your mother was down there, and my sister! And Winn! What on earth has got into you?”

Lena deliberately presses her chest, covered by a sheet of fabric so thin it’s edging in on a joke, against Kara’s. “Please tell me you’re not cross.” She says in a mocking voice, earning herself renewed pressure on her captive wrist.

“This isn’t a joke, Lena.” Kara hisses. “It was—that was—wildly, I mean, wildly inappropriate.” There’s endless revelment to be had in the way Kara rises to chomp at her bait. It has the predictability of turning the crank of an ornery Jack in the Box. If only Lena’d known how well this would work weeks earlier, the time that could have been saved.

But wasting time in looking back on the past is futile. The only thing that matters now is Kara’s blown out eyes and the fire of her hand. “You’re right.” Lena concedes, to Kara’s apparent confusion. She wets her lips in preparation of her next words. “I’ve been so, so bad.”

Kara turns a shade of red that Lena hadn’t realized human beings were capable of. Her jaw hinges open but she snaps it closed just as quickly. For a moment Lena thinks Kara might actually grab her and shake her for all the scarcely contained frustration in her face. Not touching her is an impossible task. Lena reaches her free hand up only to have that too be snatched and held. Putting up a token struggle, Lena squirms this way and that as Kara uses her arms as a buffer between their bodies.

“Stop it, I mean it.”

“Stop what?”

“I don’t know. “The tremble returns to Kara’s voice. For the first time, Lena recognizes the arousal and frustration lurking underneath. “Whatever you’re doing to me, stop it. It’s not fair.”

“Poor baby.” Lena coos. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Lena—“

“Are you going to punish me, Kara? You don’t have the nerve. I could do anything I wanted and you wouldn’t lay a single finger on me.” To demonstrate, Lena wretches her hands from Kara’s grip. It’s an easy maneuver and leaves Kara, chest heaving and impotent, with her arms hanging at her sides. Maintaining eye contact, Lena reaches underneath her dress and rolls her stockings down her legs, watching as Kara’s eyes break away to observe inches of skin revealed.

Stepping out of them, Lena crumples them into her fists and presents them to Kara. During the time she struggles to form a reaction, Lena crushes them into her face, noting the way Kara takes the assault willingly. Her head turns to one side as the fabric, with the aid of Lena’s palm, rubs into her cheek and mouth, and slowly turns back when it falls down to the floor. “See? Nothing. You’re
docile as a lamb.” Kara’s eyes are wide, searching her face. Her mouth is open. Lena aches to see anything from her, a reaction, a stirring. The longer Kara stays unruffled the more perturbed Lena is.

Lena’s palm itches. She reaches up with it and taps Kara’s left cheek. It’s not much. Just enough to again tilt her head. Still nothing, that same dizzying look. Lena recognizes it as sadness in that moment, pity maybe, and it rolls in her like a great wave. The next slap isn’t gentle. It sounds in the room and almost echoes. It leaves Kara’s body twisted and her own hand touching the assaulted cheek.

A dam broken, Lena comes at Kara with hands flying, and Kara struggles to catch her. They talk over each other and Lena lands two open-handed hits against Kara’s chest before they’re again are again captured in Kara’s grip.

“I hate you, I hate you—!”

“Lena, please—”

“I don’t understand!” They’ve walked back so that Lena’s back is pressed against the edge of the bed. She’s stopped struggling but her hair is a mess and her slip is twisted about her body. “You’ll pretend you love me, but you won’t fuck me, not even out of pity—”

“Pretend I what? Would you just listen to me for a moment? You’re being—”

“What am I, hysterical?” Lena spits. “I hate you. I wish you were dead. You disgust me endlessly.” She watches Kara’s throat bob, watches the color continue to rise to her cheeks. She’s just as disheveled as Lena is, maybe even more so. Lena gives an experimental wriggle and finds her still ironclad. “What’s the matter with you? Are you deaf as well as stupid?”

“What do you want from me, what do you want me to do?”

“Hit me, tell me you hate me, do anything—“

Before Lena’s completed her sentence, her body is being pivoted around. In a second she finds herself facing away from Kara but hinged in the middle by her forearm. Her cheek is against the fabric of the duvet, hands resting there too, and there’s a gust of cold air on her bottom. Lena recognizes that her slip has been pushed up and that without her stockings the skin there is bare. That’s all she’s able to process before she feels the hot sting of Kara’s open hand on her ass.

She squeals and her body jolts. Kara holds her fast and delivers three slaps, each increasing in intensity, to her bottom and the backs of her thighs. Lena’s hands fist in the fabric of her bedcover and she lets her mouth fall open, lets herself taste the fabric and the dye. The pain is exquisite, but temporary.

“Is that what you wanted?” Kara’s voice is raw. She drops her forearm and Lena’s fawn legs nearly collapse from under her. The arms bracing on the bed are her only saving grace from falling completely to the floor.

“Why did you stop? Do it again.” Now that Kara is no longer striking her, other feelings start to seep back in. But Kara doesn’t come back to her. She stays removed, and Lena allows her body to lower until she’s on her knees with her hands still holding the bedsheets.

“Do you love me?”

“I hate you.” Lena says again, with no bite. Her mouth is trembling.
“I know that’s not true.” Kara whispers. Her voice makes Lena feel suddenly and inexplicably like she could cry. She hears footsteps, then feels the whisp of Kara’s presence behind her. Solid hands grab her under her biceps and lift her until she’s back in her position from before. An arm around her middle, her face in the fabric of the duvet. She hasn’t seen Kara this entire time, but she doesn’t need to have seen her. Or thinks that she maybe couldn’t bare it. “Do you really think that this is going to help?”

Her hand travels up the naked back of Lena’s thigh as she says it. For the first time, Lena wonders. Fingers skim over the welted red marks where Kara had struck her and Kara’s other hand slips from beneath her stomach to rest in her hair. She doesn’t grab, but tangles, strokes. “You’re so beloved to me I feel like my heart can’t stand it.”

She chokes out a sob when Kara enters her. The hand tangled in her hair moves to rest next to her own, the one clenched in the fabric. She uses it as a brace to lower her body over Lena’s in a protective shape and reaches out with one pinky to link it with Lena’s. Before she moves, she whispers “Are you alright?” Lena turns her cheek so that Kara’s lips brush at the corner of her mouth. She wants to feel her breathing while it happens. “Has it fixed you yet?”

“Can I look at you while you’re doing it?” She says in lieu of a real answer. Kara happily obliges her, jostling their bodies until she’s on the bed and Lena’s hips rest in her lap. Her fingers resume their movement for a few blissful strokes. “I meant really look at me, Kara. Put your face next to mine.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Behind her closed eyes. Lena sees Kara being cradled in her mother’s arms as an infant, baptised in a creek bed. She sees her picking through romance novels and jimmying out the words she’ll use later to endear Lena to her so deeply. “I do love you.” As soon as the words leave her mouth, Kara is moving toward her, wrapping her up in her arms. She has other words, says other things, but they’re lost to that place that inconsequential things go, into the rock of their bodies.

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“Is this a joke? Jessica, is there no way for you to talk to your mistress?”

Jess pinkens, scrubbing harder at the plate in front of her. Above them, the chandelier trembles rhythmically. There’s a pause, a distinctly feminine moan, and then the shaking continues twofold.

“For two known homosexuals, they’re making the best of their situation. I will say that.” The maid tuts.

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“You too?” Alex says when she opens her bedroom door to see Winn looking harried. “Come in, I’ll fix you a brandy.”

Winn thinks he may have made a mistake. The sounds of it are even clearer in Alex’s bedroom. He distinctly hears Lena’s voice cry out a name.

“Kara?” Winn’s brow furrows. “Who’s Kara?”

“Must be a coping mechanism.” Alex says, downing his finger of brandy as well as her own.

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She’s being swallowed in her mouth, and her slip is falling off her body. It’s not what she’d imagined. It’s not her governess or the girls from day school, and it’s certainly not Clark. It’s Kara, pressed so deeply inside of her that she’s not sure where she ends and Lena begins. It’s her mouth and the hot promise of her body and her voice saying *I will never, ever go if you don’t want me to.* There are so many things outside of the bubble of her bed. They’ll be sitting for their portrait next week. Kara needs new white shirts. Lena needs to talk to her about the appropriate way to react when her mother flirts with her. But while Kara is moving in her, while her mouth is occupied between her legs, she can only think of only one thing.

*What a funny trick we’ve played.* She has to press her knuckles into her mouth to suppress a laugh made up of pure joy. Kara Danvers, her love, her woman, legally wed to her. She has to remember to bring it up to her tomorrow morning. Kara will find it funny too, Lena is sure.

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The attic door opens with a violent sound and a cloud of dust rising.

“Clark, dude, what the fuck? Grandma just died man, have some respect.”

“My hand slipped.” A red head pops up into the cramped space, swiveling around. “Are you sure this is where mom keeps her weed?”

“Positive, I saw her crawl up here with a box yesterday.”

“Where is she now?”

“Xanax nap.”

“Kay.” Clark emerges fully into the attic. The ceilings are high enough that he can stand at his full height but the cowlick at the back of his head brushes the ceiling. He looks around as the other boy crawls up the ladder behind him, adjusting the thick-rimmed glasses on his face. “There’s some funny shit up here, Al.”

“No kidding. You know grandma was a stone-cold weirdo. God rest her soul.” Alex makes the sign of the cross over his Canucks sweater. Clark reaches over and wipes some dust off of his brother’s head, hair the same dark red as his, and face a near mirror image. On an unspoken pact, they split up to scour the wooden confines of the attic, upturning vases, sending cardboard boxes tumbling to the floor. “Can you believe we’re in this shithole for the summer? I fucking hate Ontario.”

“Don’t let mom hear you say that. She’s sad enough already--I think I found something.” Clark beckons his brother over to a large square tarp-covered object. It sits half as tall as Clark’s body and is flanked on each side with a steamer trunk.

“That’s not mom’s kush, man.”

“I know. But maybe it’s something better?”

“Better than weed?”

Clark rolls his eyes and reaches for the corner of the tarp, giving it a sharp pull. It falls away, leaving the painting underneath exposed.
“Woah.” Alex whispers. “Dude, I think that’s our great-great-great grandparents.”

“What? No.” Clark hasn’t torn his eyes from the picture. “Dude, I told you to get glasses. That’s two ladies.”

“Fuck off, that’s great-great-great grandma Lena.” Alex points at the darker haired woman in the painting, her gaze cracked with age. “And that’s great-great-great grandpa Clark. You were named after him, fucko.”

“That. Is. A. Woman.” Clark enunciates each word with a jab of his finger. “I might be twelve but I know a woman when I see one. That looks exactly like Aunt Barb.”

“You’re on crack, Clark. If that was a woman how would they have had babies, huh, idiot?” Alex’s attention has already been stolen away. He’s opened one of the steamer trunks and is pilfering through on his knees. “Woah. This is full of like, letters and stuff.”

“What do they say?”

“Nothing interesting.” Alex’s eyes skim over the yellowed pages. They feel like tissue paper in his hands. “The worst New Year’s Eve dinner of the last decade ended in Mr. Schott trying to walk back to town in the middle of the night and my mother showing up at Clark’s bedroom half-dressed. I guess that’s spicy.”

“Some of these are kind of dirty. Listen, this one’s from Lena to Clark—I think of you fondly, my love—me on top of you, you inside of me…”

“Hold your boner, freak, those are your great-great-great grandparents.”

The sound of another set of feet clamoring up the ladder makes them both startle. A girl’s head pops up into the attic, twisted into a mask of anger. “Alex! Clark! You guys are not supposed to be up here.”

“Shut up, Olive.”

“Yeah, Olive, get that tree branch out of your ass. You’re just up to it because your dad abandoned you and your grandma is dead.”

“We have the same dad.” Olive huffs, climbing all the way up the ladder. Slightly taller than her younger brothers, she has to stoop in the confines of the room. “What are you guys doing, anyway? Is that great-great-great grandma Lena? Who’s that other lady?”

“How weird is it that we know our great-great-great grandparents on sight?” Alex wonders aloud, still skimming over the contents of a fragile letter. Clark reaches into the trunk and produces a gold locket on a long chain, popping it open with a stubby finger.

“This family is obsessed with history. Mom always says they’re the reason we’re rich. Seriously though, who’s that woman?” Olive moves closer to inspect the painting. “Is that supposed to be Clark?”

“The OG.” Alex hums. “Look—this is him…or her?” He turns the opened locket for his sibling’s inspection and they crowd around it, humming. “I’m not crazy, are I?”

“I guess. But they had 3 kids, dude. Last I heard chicks can’t get chicks pregnant. Also, that’s
insane.”

“Adoption?” Olive suggests. Clark and Alex shrug. “They lived in Creemore, right? Or whatever it was back then. You don’t think that the county clerk’s office or the library might have...I don’t know, records or something, of the adoptions or births?”

“I mean. It sounds more fun than playing ding dong ditch with grandma's neighbors while mom cries over her and dad’s wedding album.” Alex shrugs. “I’m in.”

“I think it’s stupid. But Al is right, so I’m in too.” Clark shuts the chest with finality. “Wait—mom’s weed?”

“She keeps it in grandma's old matrushka doll collection.” Olive says as she descends the staircase. “Last one to the bikes has to ride on my handlebars.”

This sparks the boys into action. They scramble down the staircase behind their sister, feet clomping on the wooden slats. Alex makes it down before Clark, who lingers for a moment. His body on the stairs and his head poking into the attic. He looks at the portrait, eyes steady, and then he begins his descent, shuttering the attic door after himself.

Chapter End Notes

again, endless thank yous to poiesis and captain-narraboth for helping me bring this story to life. and to everybody for coming along for the ride, it’s been a delight.

End Notes

If you’re a midnight botanist, click here

As always I can be found on tumblr at @seabiscuits-us

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